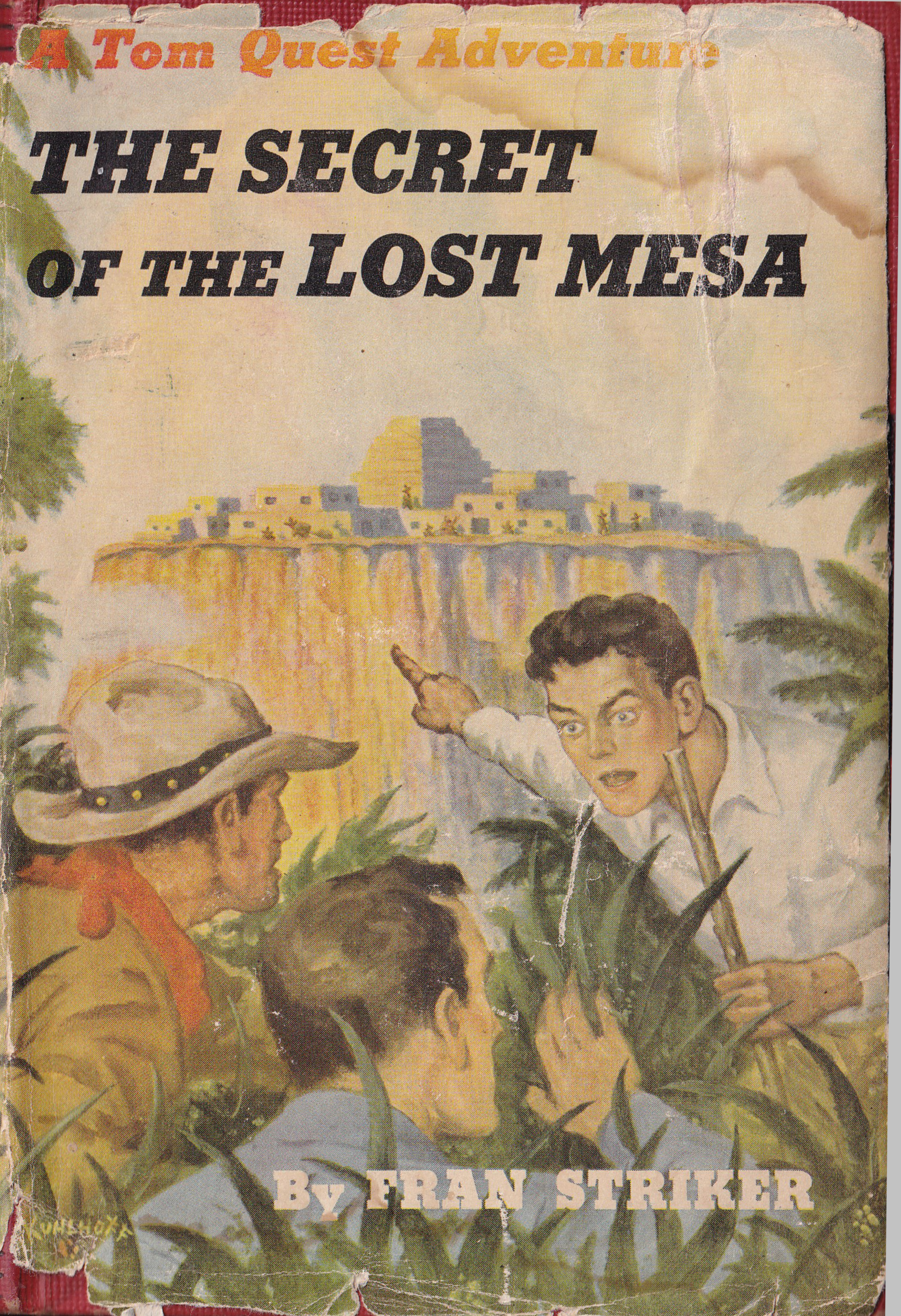
A Tom Quest Adventure

THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA



By FRAN STRIKER

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OST MESA
FRAN STRIKER

A TOM QUEST

ADVENTURE

GROSSET
& DUNLAP

A Tom Quest Adventure

THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

By FRAN STRIKER

A TOM QUEST ADVENTURE

SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

FRAN STRIKER

GROSSET & DUNLAP

A TOM QUEST ADVENTURE

A Tom Quest Adventure Story

THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

By FRAN STRIKER

The quiet vacation trip in Mexico planned by Tom Quest and his friends Whiz Walton, ace reporter, and Gulliver, the redoubtable Texan, overnight turns into an adventure jam-packed with mystery, excitement and the constant threat of sudden death.

Things start to happen from the moment Tom finds a little waterproof camera floating on the water at Tampico, attached to a small parachute. The film inside the camera is only 35-millimeter, but its sensitized surface has captured the image of an unknown mesa on which stands an ancient Aztec city untouched by the progress of one thousand years.

Fired by the enthusiasm of his father Hamilton Quest, the famous scientist-explorer, Tom sets out with Whiz and Gulliver to locate the lost mesa. It soon becomes painfully clear that someone — very much in the present — will stop at nothing to prevent the three explorers from uncovering the carefully guarded secret concealed behind the ancient walls atop the mesa.

What Tom and his friends find on the lost mesa, and how they finally overcome a dangerous enemy from out of the past, climaxes one of the most electrifying adventure stories ever written by this popular author.

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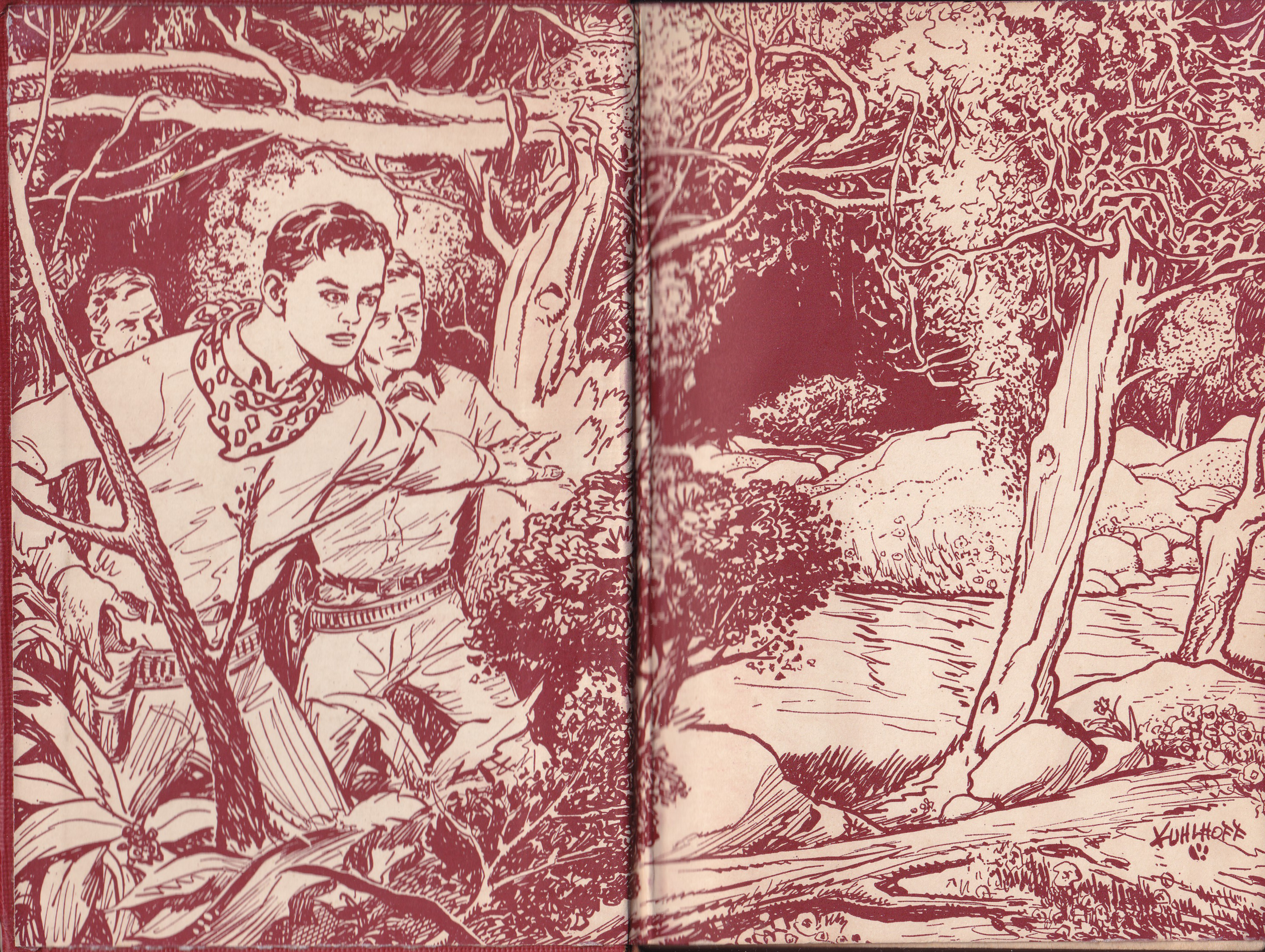
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THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

BOOKS BY
FRAN STRIKER

The Tom Quest Adventure Stories

SIGN OF THE SPIRAL
THE TELLTALE SCAR
THE CLUE OF THE CYPRESS STUMP
THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA
THE HIDDEN STONE MYSTERY

The Lone Ranger Stories *

THE LONE RANGER
THE LONE RANGER AND THE MYSTERY RANCH
THE LONE RANGER AND THE GOLD ROBBERY
THE LONE RANGER AND THE OUTLAW STRONGHOLD
THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO
THE LONE RANGER AT THE HAUNTED GULCH
THE LONE RANGER TRAPS THE SMUGGLERS
THE LONE RANGER RIDES AGAIN
THE LONE RANGER RIDES NORTH
THE LONE RANGER AND THE SILVER BULLET
THE LONE RANGER ON POWDERHORN TRAIL
THE LONE RANGER IN WILD HORSE CANYON

* *Based on the famous Lone Ranger adventures created by* GEO. W. TRENDLE.

"This," Tom exclaimed, "must be the route to the Lost Mesa!"

The Secret of the Lost Mesa

A Tom Quest Adventure

THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

BY

FRAN STRIKER

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THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

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THE SECRET OF THE LOST MESA

CHAPTER 1

The Road Block

GULLIVER was at the wheel. His jeep had been stripped of all things he considered nonessential, so the motor roared unmuffled and the wind beat at the big man's face because there was no windshield.

He squinted at something on the road ahead. Suddenly he jerked erect and snatched at the six gun on his belt.

"Git geared for trouble!" he yelled.

Tom Quest had been dozing. He opened his eyes, protected by sunglasses, as his big friend shouted, "We're bein' ambushed, Tom. The road is blocked!"

It was a fairly good highway in the southern part of Mexico. Some distance ahead, Tom saw two uniformed men waving their arms as they stood beside a parked car of ancient vintage.

"Gulliver," he cried, "put that gun away! Those men are rurales! They're the law in Mexico."

Tom Quest had to turn sideways and shout at the top of his voice to make himself heard above the rushing air.

"They're signaling for us to stop," he finished.

"I'll show the critters!" bellowed Gulliver as he rested the barrel of the gun on the top of the steering wheel.

"You've got to stop, Gulliver. Put that gun away and slow down!"

Though Gulliver was old enough to be Tom's father, he had a great deal of respect for the seventeen-year-old boy, and he didn't want to act in direct violation of any request that Tom might make. He turned his head to the right and looked squarely at Tom with a hurt expression.

"Now, Tom—" he began pleadingly.

The man in the small rear seat had been watching the road intently. When he saw Gulliver turn toward Tom, he shouted, "Keep your eyes on the road, you big oaf!"

It was Whiz Walton, the famous newspaper columnist who was accompanying Tom and Gulliver on this vacation trip through Mexico.

"Be careful," he went on. "Watch where you're going or you'll have us in the ditch!"

A wide grin appeared on Gulliver's battle-scarred and weather-beaten face.

"Good for yo', Whiz," he bellowed. "Yo' gimme an idea! I can cut off the road an' go acrost the field to git around them arm-wavin' sidewinders."

"No, no!" moaned the reporter as he glanced at the broken, rock-studded ground beyond the ditch.

"Hang on!" warned Gulliver enthusiastically. "This here jeep is goin' to buck higher'n a wild broncho with buzzin' hornets in the nostrils an' firecrackers tied to the tail!"

He holstered his gun and gripped the wheel with both hands. "I'll stand 'er on two wheels!" he went on.

Whiz Walton closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, but before Gulliver could make good his promise, Tom Quest reached forward and turned the ignition key.

"Aw-w, Tom—" Gulliver began as the engine died.

"The jeep will coast the rest of the way. You'd better stop when we get to those rurales. We'll see what they want."

"I can tell yo' what they want, Tom. They'll ask the same mess o' questions we got in Mexico City, in Puebla, an' all them other places we went through. They'll want to see our travel permits, an' our huntin' licenses, an' our gun permits—" Gulliver's voice trailed off in a sigh of resignation. He stepped on the brake and brought the jeep to a halt a few yards away from the men who represented law and order in the southern part of Mexico.

Tom got out of the jeep and took off his sunglasses, and Whiz Walton followed after disentangling his long, lean legs from the assortment of camping equipment in the back of the car. Gulliver squirmed and grunted as he slid sideways from the wholly inadequate seat beneath the steering wheel.

The rurale, whose breast was covered with medals sus-

pended from brilliant ribbons, stepped up to Tom and Whiz, saluted and smiled, showing fine, even, white teeth. He spoke in fairly good English, introducing himself as Captain Rodrigo Cervantes, and asked for credentials of identification.

"We're ready for you," Whiz Walton said. He extended a leather folder. "We've been through this before. You'll find everything in there, and it's all in good order."

"Here are my credentials," Tom said.

Smiling, Captain Cervantes extended his hand, and then his face became a frozen mask. The smile gave way to a look almost of terror. His eyes, wide and staring, were focused on something behind Tom Quest and the reporter.

There was a gasp from the other rurale, who wore a similar expression of incredulity. Tom knew the cause of the lawmen's dismay when he heard the voice of Gulliver behind his back.

When the big man spoke in a conversational tone, his voice had the nerve-jangling quality of a buzz saw ripping through a sheet of rusty tin. And Gulliver's colorful choice of words was not calculated to give a stranger peace of mind.

"Gittin' stopped like this is gittin' purely monotonous. When I'm delayed, I git as touchy as a teased snake. An' when I'm touchy, I do things that make men wish they had never been born. Now, speak yo' piece, an' be done with it. I hanker to reach Oaxaca by sundown."

Gulliver was indeed an awe-inspiring sight. His natural height was six feet six inches, but his blue denim trousers were tucked into high-heeled cowboy boots that made him appear considerably taller. His torso was proportioned like a barrel, and his head seemed to rise from the massive shoulders with no neck in between. His eyes glared angrily from beneath thick eyebrows that were joined above his broken nose to make a solid hedge at the base of a sloping forehead. Gulliver had spent many years in cowboy country. For amusement he had wrestled steers and matched his strength against the wildest horses. His face bore the marks of many spills and injuries. Now it was as grim as granite, and just as hard. He stood with his clenched fists resting on his hips.

"Git on with it," he rasped. "What do yo' want of us?"

Captain Cervantes looked from Gulliver to the jeep, then back again, as if wondering how so much bulk could be transported in so small a car.

His partner had recovered a measure of composure. With brisk efficiency he drew a notebook from his pocket, flipped it open and compared the numbers written on one page to the license number on the jeep. He snapped the notebook closed and clicked his heels. Saluting, he spoke a few words in Spanish to his superior.

"Did you catch what he said, Tom?" Whiz Walton asked.

Tom nodded. "He had the number of the jeep written down in that notebook."

"Doggone," muttered Gulliver. "This is different from

the other times we got stopped. This time they was a-layin' for us."

Captain Cervantes scanned the credentials quickly and returned them.

"Thus far," he said, "it is as it should be."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Tom.

"Señor, I am so sorry. I regret the necessity of further proof. But we have been ordered to make sure beyond all question of doubt."

"Make sure o' what?" demanded Gulliver.

The captain seemed to wince at the big man's tone, but he replied in the same courteous and slightly apologetic manner.

"We must make sure there is no doubt of your identity. The three of you answer the description we have been given, but to make sure, I must see the ring."

"Ring?" echoed Tom.

"What ring?" asked Gulliver.

Tom held up his left hand. "Do you mean this?" he asked.

On one finger he wore a ring on which had been mounted a gold spiral, a pattern that slightly resembled a question mark. The spiral originally had been one of a pair of earrings designed by Tom Quest's father and worn by his mother. After the death of his wife, Tom's father had given one of the earrings to Tom, and the other to Gulliver. They had been mounted on rings which the boy and his big friend wore at all times.

Readers of *Sign of the Spiral* will remember the strange meeting between Tom and Whiz Walton, and the manner in which the spiral put these two and Gulliver on the trail of a notorious gang whose hideout was beneath a ghost town. The substantial reward for the capture of this gang had financed an expedition into the unexplored jungles of Peru in search of Tom's long-lost father. Here again the spiral pattern of the ring had played a prominent part in Tom Quest's life. There had been trials and perils among the Jivaro headhunters before Hamilton Quest had been found in an Indian village, a prisoner of the world's most savage people. These adventures are related in *The Telltale Scar.*

"I," rumbled Gulliver, stepping forward, "got a ring to match that one o' Tom's." He waggled his hamlike fist an inch beneath the eyes of Captain Cervantes. Two diamonds in the ring flashed all the colors of the rainbow. "What about it?"

Captain Cervantes stepped back half a pace and bowed stiffly. "Señor, I am satisfied."

"Then we can be on our way?" asked Tom.

"You will," replied the rurale, "follow us into Oaxaca."

"Follow you?" Whiz Walton queried. "But why?"

"I have my orders. I am to take you to—" the captain stopped abruptly, paused, then finished, "—to certain men who are waiting at the Hotel Monte Alban."

"Yo' mean to say we're under arrest?"

"No, señor. You are—let us say—in custody."

"Now take it easy, big boy," admonished Whiz Walton hastily as Gulliver's face went dark with rage. "If you get tough, you'll only make things worse."

Gulliver looked reproachfully at Tom. "If I'd o' had my way," he complained, "we'd o' kept on goin' without stoppin' for these double-twisted tinhorn soldiers."

There was a coughing and a series of explosive sounds as the number-two rurale started the official car.

"We go," said Captain Cervantes as he turned and walked away.

"What do you make of it, Whiz?" asked Tom.

The reporter shrugged his shoulders. "You got me, Tom."

"For two cents—" Gulliver began.

"Let's go," cut in Tom Quest. "Something's cooking in Oaxaca, and I'd like to know what it is."

The rurales' car moved to the center of the highway and stopped. Captain Cervantes turned in his seat and watched.

Gulliver kicked the starter and slapped the gearshift lever. "Well," he bellowed impatiently at the men ahead, "can yo' travel under yo' own power, or do yo' want me to give yo' a nudge?"

Captain Cervantes waved airily and smiled.

As the two cars started forward, Gulliver's voice dropped to a throaty rumble. "Yo' know, Tom," he said, "I'd sure like to put this jeep into the four-wheel drive, then trample hard on the accelerator. I bet yo' I

could nudge that there police car clean off'n the highway."

Tom didn't seem to hear the remark. He was lost in thought, wondering who had sent the rurales to bring him and his friends in custody to the Hotel Monte Alban in Oaxaca.

CHAPTER 2

An Enemy Reappears

TOM QUEST had long since learned not to be deceived by the disarming courtesy of the rurales. Their manner was stereotyped. Whether they were arresting a criminal or merely inspecting the credentials of a tourist, they maintained the same polite and formal manner.

Tom knew that he and his friends were virtually prisoners despite the fact that Gulliver had been permitted to keep his revolver. Gulliver chafed and fretted as he held the jeep to fifteen miles an hour while following the car of the officials. He mumbled constantly. Tom Quest was silent.

He tried to recall each incident of the camping trip that had begun at the Texas border several weeks ago.

Though Mexico had many laws pertaining to hunting and fishing by tourists, the Government was inclined toward leniency where *norteamericanos* were concerned.

Even so, Tom could think of nothing that had been done in violation of the statutes. Surely nothing serious enough to cause an order to block off the road to be flashed ahead by telephone or telegraph.

To date the trip had been quite uneventful. The jeep had covered hundreds of miles after crossing the border at Nuevo Laredo. It had rolled south along the highway through Monterrey, Linares, El Limone, Mante. At Mante the vacationists had cut east to visit Tampico, then back to the main highway at Ciudad Villes. Between there and Mexico City they had been asked to show their credentials on a few occasions and had gone through the same routine after leaving Mexico City. Each time they had been allowed to proceed without question.

The quiet trip was in striking contrast to their recent adventure in the Florida Everglades. In Florida, Tom, accompanied by Whiz and Gulliver, had spent but a few days in travel. Every minute of those few days had been jam-packed with mystery, excitement, adventure and the constant threat of sudden death. The story of that trip, which began when the three set out to keep a midnight rendezvous with a ghost ship, and ended with the capture of a gang of platinum pirates, is recounted in *The Clue of the Cypress Stump*.

Tom shuddered involuntarily as he recalled the cold, emotionless leader of that gang. It was good to know that Koerner and the rest of his gang had been safely delivered into the custody of Federal agents.

"Tom—" It was Whiz Walton speaking from the back seat.

The boy turned.

"I can't figure it out."

"You mean the way we've been taken in tow?"

The reporter nodded.

Tom shook his head. "I can't either, Whiz. I can't think of a single thing we've done that's been out of line."

"Neither can I," replied the newshound. "Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Well," continued Whiz, "when we made camp near Monterrey Gulliver wanted to go into the town to do some shopping, remember? We weren't with him on that trip. He went alone, and he was gone for a couple of hours. We don't know what he did."

A throaty rumble came from the driver. Then Gulliver said, "Whiz, if yo're hintin' around that I got into trouble in Monterrey—"

"I didn't say that."

"I just went into the town to git me some o' them hot Mexican peppers. I was gone for quite a spell because I had to shop around to find the place that had 'em hottest."

"Are you sure you didn't get into any arguments?"

"I ought to know!"

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Well, I didn't git into no arguments, an' if I had, I'd o' settled 'em up complete. I wouldn't o' left no loose ends danglin'."

Tom said, "Whiz, I've been thinking about Tampico."

"What about Tampico?"

"Maybe we should have turned that camera we found over to the authorities."

Tom referred to an incident that had been nearly forgotten. While strolling along the beach near Tampico, the boy's attention had been caught by a piece of white silk about six feet square that was floating on the water. He had fished it out. It proved to be a small parachute to which a waterproof camera was attached. There had been no identification on either the camera or the parachute, but inside the camera was a roll of film that had been fully exposed. Tom had packaged the film and sent it by air mail to his father, who was staying near Miami. The camera, still wrapped in the parachute, was packed in one of the duffel bags.

"We surely didn't break any laws," said Whiz Walton.

"I don't think we did," agreed Tom. "After all, we did report the finding of the camera to the authorities, and we put an ad in a couple of the papers, saying that the owner of the camera could have it by claiming it. What more could we do?"

"Yo' didn't even have to do that, Tom," put in Gulliver. "Finders is keepers."

Whiz said, "Maybe the owner of the camera saw the ad and asked the rurales to stop us. Maybe he's the one who's waiting in Oaxaca at the Hotel Monte Alban."

"Roarin' thunderbolts!" exploded Gulliver. "If we've been cut down to creepin' speed because some careless jughead wants his camera back, I'll sure unload a few things I got on my mind!"

Fifteen minutes later, the police car and the jeep that followed it entered Oaxaca and halted in front of a second-rate hotel.

Captain Cervantes came to the side of the jeep, clicked his heels and saluted. "All of you," he said, "please follow me."

"We got a lot o' stuff in this here jeep," Gulliver argued. "One of us had better stay on guard."

The captain explained that the jeep and its contents would be carefully watched by his companion.

"I am," he finished, "requested to bring all three of you to those who are waiting inside."

"Oh, all right." The jeep creaked as Gulliver squirmed out and joined Tom Quest and Whiz on the sidewalk. "Let's git this over with. Go on an' lead the way."

The small group entered the hotel without a backward glance. There was no reason to look at the café across the street from the hotel. Even if Tom or one of the others had happened to look in that direction, it was hardly

likely that they would have noticed the two men who sat next to the window. But one of those two men had seen the jeep and its passengers. He had blinked and stared intently.

He was a very thin man with a head that seemed too large for his scrawny neck and narrow shoulders. His bald pate and his pinched, sunken face were almost colorless. His pale-blue eyes seemed to look at the world through a film of inscrutability.

The thin man was a fugitive from justice in the United States. The rest of his gang had gone to jail. They were in jail at that very moment. They had been put there by the efforts of Tom Quest, Gulliver and Whiz Walton.

The fugitive who had sought refuge in the southern part of Mexico was Koerner. And the three who had wrecked his plans for the future and exposed his hide-out in the Florida Everglades had just entered the hotel across the street!

Koerner's mouth was set in a grim, hard line. His long, tapering fingers closed and opened like the talons of a vulture. He spoke in a low voice to his swarthy table companion.

"Ojo, you have bragged that you have influence in any part of southern Mexico."

Ojo was short and flabby. His greasy cheeks were jowls that moved like jelly when he talked. He drew back his thick lips in an ingratiating smile that exposed an uneven row of discolored upper teeth.

"Amigo," he said, "how is it my influence can be of further benefit to you?"

"Did you notice the three who just entered the hotel behind the captain?"

Ojo nodded and said, "Sí, sí."

"I want to know why they came here; why they went to that hotel; who they talk to; and what they say."

Ojo pushed back his chair and left the table.

Koerner watched through the window as the other man crossed the street with a mincing, almost catlike step and entered the hotel.

Meanwhile, Captain Cervantes had led the way up a flight of stairs to the second floor. His heels pounded importantly along the corridor. He rapped on the door of the room at the end of the long hall.

When the door was opened, Tom Quest gasped and stared at the last man on earth he had expected to meet in Oaxaca.

"Dad!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER 3

Photograph of a Mystery

HAMILTON QUEST had achieved a nationwide reputation both as a scientist and an explorer. As a young man he had been a college instructor in mathematics, physics and several other sciences. He had written a number of books on various subjects, one of which dealt with surveying. This had led to an assignment in the Florida Everglades. There he had become interested in the Seminole Indians and spent many years exploring and charting parts of the country where no white man had ever been before.

His interest in Indians had taken him to Mexico, where he had spent some time in research dealing with

the seven principal tribes of the forerunners of the Aztecs, going back as far as 648 A.D.

Later, he had gone into the jungles of Peru and Ecuador. After ten years as a captive of the Jivaro headhunters, he had returned to Florida with the announcement that his travels were ended.

Tom, Gulliver and Whiz Walton had left him there in a comfortable cottage near Miami. Their surprise was understandable, therefore, when he greeted them in the small Oaxaca hotel.

There was another man in the room with Hamilton Quest. He was a distinguished-looking Mexican with snow-white hair and a well-rounded stomach. Judging from his clothing and the diamond on his finger, Don Alfredo Gonzales was a man of considerable wealth.

"I met Señor Gonzales years ago," Hamilton Quest explained in introducing the Mexican. "As a matter of fact, he shared my interest in the ancient Aztec civilization. He has many influential friends and he made it possible for me to examine records that might otherwise have been closed to me."

Gonzales smiled warmly and spoke in perfect English. "I," he said, shaking hands with Tom, "am delighted to meet the son of my good friend. I have heard so much about you."

He shook hands with Gulliver and then with Whiz.

Meanwhile Captain Cervantes stood at attention near

the door. Señor Gonzales glanced at the rurale and dismissed him with a gesture.

"Dad," began Tom Quest, "I don't understand. Why did you leave Florida? How did you get here ahead of us? How did you know where to find us?"

"I didn't know where to find you, Tom. Of course, I had a general idea of where you three planned to go, but I was by no means sure that you would not change your plans."

"It would not have mattered," put in Señor Gonzales. "Word was sent from Mexico City to watch every road for you."

The smile on the thin, scholarly face of Hamilton Quest expanded and broke into a chuckle as he looked at the expressions of bewilderment on the faces of his son and his friends.

"Sit down," he said, "and I'll explain."

Tom and Whiz found places on a couch while Gulliver sat on a straight-backed, uncomfortable-looking chair near the door. Gonzales lighted a long, thin cigar and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

Tom's father stood next to a table at one end of the room, waiting until the others were comfortably settled. His face became sober and his eyes were directed at the ceiling as if he were considering his next remark. He began to speak slowly without lowering his eyes. His voice was low and deliberate.

"The ancient Aztecs," he said, "were a race whose civilization was highly advanced. We have a fairly accurate record of the Aztecs from the time of Montezuma and the Spanish conquest to the present.

"We know that prior to Montezuma, the Aztec people were a curious mixture of barbaric splendor and civilization that might be compared to the civilization of the early Egyptians. We know that they had great temples of stone, but most of these were abandoned long ago."

The explorer lowered his eyes and assumed the manner of an instructor addressing a class.

"The temples and monuments," he continued, "were made of huge blocks of stone and covered with rich carvings, but in country like this, buildings once abandoned soon disappear under the profusion of foliage, and only chance excavation brings them to light.

"Just a few years ago, a temple was found by men who had dug six feet into the ground. The building was hewn stone and paved with heavy flagstones."

Tom Quest knew, and so did his companions, that his father was leading up to something of tremendous importance. Whiz Walton had a curious tingling sensation that ran up and down his spine. It was a feeling that always warned the newshound that big things were impending. He leaned forward on the couch and cocked his head slightly to one side in an attitude of concentrated listening as Hamilton Quest continued.

"All of Mexico once belonged to the Aztecs. Accord-

ing to the legend, the country was first settled by a chief who saw a cactus growing on a rock, and on the cactus an eagle perched, holding a snake in its beak. He considered this a good omen and immediately founded a city. This happened in the year 1325."

"Why, that's the coat of arms of Mexico!" broke in Tom.

His father smiled. "That's right, Tom. The eagle holding a serpent is the coat of arms of modern Mexico. There are many other legends as well as rumors. Years ago, when Señor Gonzales and I were in this part of Mexico, we tried to find evidence to support a rumor that one of those ancient Aztec cities is still in existence, untouched by the progress of one thousand years."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "A lost people!"

"It is said," continued Hamilton Quest, "that these people fled to an island to escape the Spanish conquerors under Cortez. They remained there, entirely self-sufficient, cut off from the rest of the world."

"You're talking about a rumor, aren't you?" asked Whiz. "There's nothing to support such a story of a lost people?" He paused when he saw a strange expression on the face of the scholar. "Or—or is there?" he finished weakly.

"The existence of such a place has been established beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Gosh!" gasped Tom.

Whiz Walton let out a low, exclamatory whistle. "What a story! What a story!" he murmured. "Holy mackerel! If I could get some photographs of a place like that—" He left the sentence suspended.

Quest opened the drawer of the table near which he stood, and took out a large Manila envelope.

"The photographs," he said, "are here."

Whiz leaped to his feet.

"Just a moment, Whiz. Sit down until I have finished. I have something more to tell you."

The newshound subsided and tried to control the turmoil of excitement that seethed in his brain. Here, within his grasp, was the story of the year—the story of the century. His imagination was running rampant as he saw eight-banner headlines on every paper in the country.

"How," he asked with a nervous tremor in his voice, "how in blazes did you get photographs?"

Hamilton Quest smiled slowly. He seemed to be enjoying the excitement of the usually imperturbable reporter. His next remark was calculated to bring Whiz once more to his feet.

"You sent them to me."

Whiz jumped up. "What?"

"You and Tom. Don't you remember the film you sent me from Tampico?"

Tom said, "You mean that film from the waterproof

camera we found floating on the water at Tampico, attached to a parachute?"

"That's the one, Tom."

"But that was a small film. It was only thirty-five millimeter."

"The pictures were exceptionally sharp. I had them enlarged. As soon as I saw them, Tom, I chartered a plane and flew across the Gulf to Mexico City. I showed them to Señor Gonzales. We studied them together."

"That is right," put in the Mexican. "We studied the pictures most carefully, and then set out to learn what we could about the man who took them."

Tom said, "Whiz and I figured that the camera had been dropped from a plane."

Gonzales nodded. "Your father and I learned that a plane had crashed for lack of fuel a few miles inland and some distance north of Tampico. The pilot was instantly killed."

Hamilton Quest spread out a map of Mexico and pointed to Chiapas, which lay almost due east of Oaxaca.

"Right here," he said, "is where that flier took off."

With his pencil he traced a line northwesterly along the Mexican coast to Tampico.

"Here he must have realized his fuel would be exhausted before he could reach a safe landing. Obviously he dropped his camera by parachute, hoping it would be found. Now, here is a curious thing. When that pilot

took off, he probably had sufficient fuel to reach his destination. Either by intent or accident, he did not follow a direct route. He must have used up his fuel circling low over a mountainous region somewhere around here."

Quest's pencil circled an area that included the northeastern part of the state of Oaxaca and the southern part of Vera Cruz.

"Somewhere inside this circle," he said, "that pilot photographed the Aztecs living as they did in ancient times—cut off from the rest of the world—on the Lost Mesa!"

CHAPTER 4

The Evil Eye

THE SPINDLY CHAIR near the door squeaked protestingly as Gulliver shifted his weight. He scowled darkly. His fingernail rasped on the stubble of beard that had grown since his morning shave. Tom Quest recognized this as a sign of perplexity.

"What's the matter with you, Gulliver?" he asked.

"Loose ends," grumbled the big man. He looked at Hamilton Quest and went on in an injured tone. "Yo' know blamed well the story yo' just told don't hold together."

"Why not?" demanded the explorer in surprise.

"A little while ago, yo' was tellin' how them Aztec Injuns set themselves up on an island so's the Spanish critters couldn't git 'em."

"That's right."

"Well, then," said Gulliver triumphantly, "if they was on an island, what's this talk about a lost mesa? An island is a hunk o' land with water on all sides, but a mesa ain't nothin' like that. We got aplenty o' mesas in Texas, an' every one I've ever seen is a flat-topped chunk o' land that sticks up like a wart on level country. An' no water's anywhere in sight."

Quest laughed. "Gulliver," he said, "a thousand or more years bring about a lot of changes. In that time, mountains, rivers and forests grow where none had been before. Lakes may develop where there was once a verdant valley; or a lake may dry up and a jungle grow in its place."

Gulliver looked unconvinced.

"I'll show you the photographs."

"That," put in Whiz Walton, "is what I'm waiting for."

"This first one," said Hamilton Quest, holding up a glossy print about eleven inches wide and fourteen inches long, "is an airplane photograph of the mesa from a distance."

On each side of the picture, hills well covered with dense forests sloped gently toward the center. There the valley was almost barren.

"Other photographs," explained the scientist, pointing to the valley, "show certain geological conditions that prove conclusively that this valley was once the bed of a fair-sized lake."

Señor Gonzales nodded and muttered, "Beyond doubt."

"Apparently the ground is mostly rock and hardpan. It conspires with the high altitude to keep plant life from developing."

He pointed to an object that stood like a square tombstone far in the background, in the center of the open valley.

"This," he said, " is the Lost Mesa."

"Thunderation," rumbled Gulliver. "Is that what all the hullabaloo's about? Why, doggone it, that there thing don't look to be no size at all."

Hamilton Quest produced a second picture. "Here is a closer view of the mesa."

The top of the formation seemed to be as level as an airport, and many times as wide as its height. The sides were nearly perpendicular.

Tom looked at the picture closely. "I thought you said there were people on top of the mesa," he said.

"That's right, son."

"But, Dad, as far as I can see, there's nothing at all on the mesa."

"That photograph was made from several miles away."

"Several miles!" exclaimed the boy. "Why, it looks as though the camera were right on top of it."

"The mesa," explained Hamilton Quest, "is surprisingly large. Here, Tom, look at the next picture. In this one, you can see the buildings."

Tom was not the only one whose eyes were wide with incredulity. Whiz Walton murmured, "Holy mackerel!"

Gulliver squinted with one eye, as if he strongly suspected that the whole thing was some kind of fraud.

The closer view showed many buildings, and all were made of stone. The largest of the buildings seemed to be a sort of palace whose walls enclosed gardens and courts. Another picture at close range showed people in a market place on one side of the palace. Their faces were upturned and they were unmistakably the faces of Aztec Indians.

The wonder of the mesa became more and more apparent as Hamilton Quest exhibited the rest of the photographs. It was incredible that a place of such magnitude could have been lost for so many years.

"And despite these photographs," Quest said, "it *remains* a lost mesa. The pilot who took the pictures is the only one who knew its whereabouts, and he is dead. He very probably is the first man who ever flew over this part of the world."

"So what?" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "We know there *is* such a place. We know it's somewhere—" he stabbed at the map spread out on the floor "—in that part of the country. Let's go find it."

"Wherever it is," said Señor Gonzales, "you may be sure of one thing. It is practically inaccessible."

"Inaccessible my eye!" boomed Gulliver. "We got my jeep, ain't we?"

"There are places," smiled Hamilton Quest, "where even your jeep can't go. Look at the size of some of those trees on the mountainside. Your jeep can't climb trees."

Gulliver scowled. "I never tried that," he said.

"Dad," Tom's eyes were sparkling with eagerness and enthusiasm. "Let's try to find the Lost Mesa."

"It's out of the question for me, Tom. I'm too old to start on an expedition through that kind of country."

"And I," Señor Gonzales shook his head sadly, "I, also, am too old. In the past twenty years, I have acquired a fortune in money and a large measure of influence. I am envied by many people in Mexico City. I am looked upon as a man who has all that might be desired, but I would trade all I have to be twenty years younger."

"How about the three of us?" demanded Tom. "Why can't we go in search of the Lost Mesa?" He looked at Whiz, who nodded sharply, then at his father. "What about it, Dad?"

"I thought you would say that, Tom. In fact, I counted on it. I told Señor Gonzales that if anyone could get through to the Lost Mesa, you three were the ones to do it."

"What about a plane?" asked Whiz. "It seems to me a plane might be landed at the base of the mesa without much trouble."

Gulliver opened his mouth to speak in defense of his jeep as a means of transportation but was silenced by a wave of Señor Gonzales' hand.

"We have discussed already the use of a plane, and rejected it," the Mexican said. "A plane could not be moved from any landing field in Mexico without permission of the Government. Though I could get that permission and the use of the plane, the expedition could not be kept secret."

"It must be kept secret at all costs," said Hamilton Quest. "If the slightest rumor of our hopes and plans leaked out, there would be a stampede of scientists, adventurers and explorers."

Whiz Walton had picked up the map. He was scrutinizing it closely. "Just how many square miles of territory are included in this circle?" he asked.

"We can give you more specific information than that," said Hamilton Quest. "Since my arrival in Mexico, Señor Gonzales and I have worked out a chart which I am sure will help you. We are able to reject parts of the country that are known—parts that have been explored within the past decade. We were able to reject other sections that have been photographed by plane. By a process of elimination, we have localized the Lost Mesa to a comparatively small area. You will have to explore that area and do the best you can."

During the past few minutes, Gulliver had been sitting slightly sideways with his ear close to the door. Now he leaped up suddenly, grabbed the door and jerked it open.

There was an audible gasp of surprise from a small

man in a dark suit who had been standing in the hall.

"Yo'!" bellowed Gulliver.

His hand shot out, but the eavesdropper was too quick. He turned and ran down the hall like a frightened rabbit.

Gulliver stomped after him, but his high-heeled boots were not designed for running.

"Come back here!" he roared. "I'll teach yo' to coyote around at a closed door!"

Tom Quest dashed past Gulliver. "I'll get him," he cried. As he reached the top of the long flight of stairs, he saw the fugitive race through the lobby of the hotel. Tom bounded down the stairs three at a time and raced past the startled clerk at the registration desk.

The street was crowded with pedestrians and traffic. Looking in both directions, Tom saw no sign of the small man in the dark suit. There was no use going any farther. The snooper had been swallowed up in the congestion of the thoroughfare.

When Tom returned to the room upstairs, Gulliver was pacing the floor, his huge hands clenched and his face purple with anger.

"If they's anythin' I hate," he growled, "it's someone that tries to fold an ear around my personal affairs!"

"I wonder," Whiz said, "how long he had been listening outside that door."

"When did you first hear him, Gulliver?" asked Tom's father.

"He couldn't o' been there long. I heard a squeakin' floor board in the hall, an' then I heard another, closer to the door. That was when I leaned close to listen, an' a second later, I opened the door."

"Opened it," repeated Whiz Walton dryly. "That's a masterpiece of understatement." He pointed to the casing, which was splintered near the latch. "Didn't anyone ever tell you about turning a doorknob?" he inquired. "You almost tore the wall out."

Gulliver fingered the split mahogany. "I tried," he said apologetically, "to take that critter by surprise."

In the meantime, the small man walked swiftly through the streets until he was certain he was not being followed. Then he returned to the area of the hotel and entered the café across the street.

Koerner was still sitting at the table. He looked at Ojo coldly.

"Sit down," he said.

"Señor," began Ojo, "I had misfortune and—"

"I saw you running out of the hotel."

"It took some time for me to learn the number of the room to which the norteamericanos had gone. When finally I reached the door, I was there but a moment when—"

Koerner cut the small man off. "Spare me the details."

"But, señor—"

"I am interested only in one thing. Did you learn why those who came here in the small car are in this part of Mexico?"

Ojo nodded his head quickly. "Sí, sí," he said.

"Well?"

"You will not like what I have to tell you, Señor Koerner. But do not be angry with me. It is not my fault, I swear to you, amigo. I have said nothing to anyone."

Koerner slapped the table impatiently with his claw-like hand. "Speak!" he said sharply. "Why are they here?"

"They—they—" faltered Ojo, whose name translated from the Aztec meant "The Evil Eye," "—are going in search of the Lost Mesa."

The faint color that anger and impatience had brought to Koerner's face drained out, leaving the cadaverous countenance a pasty white that looked like death. It was wholly without expression, but the small, hard mouth was compressed to a thin line without lips. Every muscle of the former secret agent was frozen to immobility and remained that way for several seconds.

Ojo trembled visibly. Never in his association with Koerner had he seen the thin man so stunned by an announcement.

Finally Koerner spoke. "Ojo, you once told me that you had never committed murder."

"Oh no, no, señor!"

"You will, however. You will kill to save your own worthless carcass."

Koerner moved slowly, stiffly. He rose to his feet.

"Follow me," he commanded in clipped tones.

He left the café and walked quickly down the street with Ojo pattering behind.

CHAPTER 5

The Snooper

GULLIVER went shopping with characteristic singleness of purpose. He knew exactly what he wanted to augment the camping equipment and other travel paraphernalia already in the jeep. There were many items such as machetes, concentrated food, pills for purifying questionable water, and medical supplies that might be needed when the small expedition was on its own and out of touch with civilization.

Gulliver had prepared a list. His shopping was no hit-and-miss affair. With dogged persistence, he went to shop after shop in the small town of Oaxaca until he had found and purchased item number one.

In one place, Tom Quest called his attention to an excellent stock of machetes and hunting knives, but these were numbers four and five respectively on Gulliver's list.

"We'll git to them later," the big man stated flatly.

For two days, Tom and Whiz Walton followed Gulliver and admired the way in which he secured what he wanted. From noon until two P.M. was siesta time throughout all Mexico. Most storekeepers customarily dozed in the shade against their locked shop doors during the heat of the day.

Gulliver refused to recognize this custom. Having roused them from their slumbers, he bullied and threatened the shopkeepers until they attended to his trade. In one case, he drove his jeep across the sidewalk until the bumper pressed against the door of a shop that dealt in canned goods. Then, in no uncertain terms, he let it be known that he would either walk in through an unlocked door, or drive in, taking the door with him.

In the meantime, Whize Walton had sent a coded telegram to New York, mentioning the Lost Mesa, and stating that he hoped to come back with the story of the year. The reply, when it came in code from J. V. Langdon, publisher of the *Metropolitan Journal*, brought a whoop of joy from the lean newshound.

"Get a load of this!" he exclaimed as he burst into one of the rooms Hamilton Quest had reserved for the party in the hotel.

Tom Quest saw the yellow paper which Whiz was waving wildly. "What is it?" he asked. "A reply to your telegram?"

"Reply is right! Old J. V. has crashed through in a big way."

"Yo' boss?" asked Gulliver.

"Yeah. He says the trip's on him—expense no object. He's telegraphing cash to cover everything!"

"But," put in Tom, "Dad and Señor Gonzales gave us cash for our outfit."

"Let my paper finance it. The *Metropolitan Journal* can well afford to. And say, Tom, as long as money's no object, I have an idea."

"What's that?"

Whiz strode across the room to a desk where Gulliver had left his shopping list. He scanned the items that were yet to be purchased, then made an addition at the bottom.

"A movie camera," he said. "I saw a top-notch American-made camera in one of the shops. We'll get that tomorrow, and a supply of film. We'll bring back movies of the Lost Mesa."

If it had not been for the purchase of that movie camera, Tom Quest and his friends might never have known that the Lost Mesa held a grim secret of international importance. They might never have realized that their trip was to be opposed by one of the most ruthless, cold-blooded individuals in the Western Hemisphere, a man who gave orders even to the high priestess who ruled the ancient city on the mesa.

Tom remained in the jeep while Gulliver and Whiz went into the shop to buy the camera and the film. It was late afternoon and this was to be the last of the purchases. The three planned to set out on their trip at daybreak.

Everything required for the journey had been loaded compactly in the jeep, and it had been deemed advisable for someone to remain on guard against pilferers.

Tom was toying with a radio. It was a short-wave, two-way radio by which contact might be maintained with Señor Gonzales and Tom's father, who were to wait in Mexico City until the search for the Lost Mesa was ended.

The jeep was parked next door to a hotel much smaller than the Hotel Monte Alban. Tom heard the wheezy motor and the clatter of a taxicab that stopped in front of the small hotel. Tom turned and eyed the old car with amusement. As the passenger stepped out and reached in his pocket for money to pay the driver, Tom saw only the passenger's back, but there was something familiar about the figure. He was a small man who wore a dark suit. His neck was short and thick, and his thin hair was long enough to overlap the white collar of his shirt.

Then Tom remembered where he had seen the man. It was the man he had pursued two days ago—the man who had been eavesdropping during the discussion of the Lost Mesa!

Ojo turned. He saw Tom and the jeep, and his myopic

eyes went wide in recognition. His swarthy face wore the same startled expression Tom had seen when Gulliver jerked open the bedroom door.

Ojo shouted something to the driver. As he opened the door to re-enter the cab, Tom was out of the jeep and running. The driver raced the motor, but before he could put the car in gear, before Ojo could close the door, the boy leaped on the running board, reached in and grabbed the white-faced man by the lapels of his coat.

"Come out here!" he cried. "We want to talk to you!"

Ojo screamed for help. His small hands clutched at Tom Quest's wrists and tugged in an effort to free himself.

The taxicab driver jumped from his seat and grabbed Tom from behind. He threw his arms around the boy's neck in a strangling grip while he shouted for aid at the top of his voice.

Tom couldn't breathe. He clung desperately to Ojo. He tried to shake off the man whose grip was making him grow giddy. He was only vaguely aware of the people in the street who looked up startled by the outcries, and a near-by man in uniform who advanced on the run. Tom's wind was cut off by the grip around his throat.

He heard the booming voice of Gulliver. "I'll learn yo'!" the big man bellowed.

There was a sharp *splat* followed by a gasp as the taxicab driver released his grip and sprawled several yards to

one side from the awful impact of Gulliver's open-handed slap.

"Gulliver!" gasped Tom.

"Yo', Tom—what yo' got?"

"The snooper."

Gulliver recognized the man. "Yo'," he boomed. "Roarin' thunderbolts, we got questions to ask yo'!" Pushing Tom aside, he said, "I'll handle this."

He reached into the back seat of the taxicab and his massive fist closed on a handful of Ojo's vest. He gave a jerk that brought the small man into the open in a hurry.

"Git to the jeep, Tom," Gulliver shouted. "Yo' drive. I'll handle this galoot!"

He tossed the screaming, wildly thrashing man over one shoulder like a sack of flour.

"Yo' keep squirmin'," he warned as he strode toward the jeep, "an' I'll just lullaby yo' by bouncin' yo' head on the pavement."

At the side of the jeep he shrugged his shoulder and Ojo dropped in among the packages and boxes.

Tom was at the wheel and had the motor started. He saw Whiz Walton coming from the camera store.

"Whiz!" he cried.

Gulliver glanced around and sized up the situation quickly. A number of natives and two rurales were closing in and their manner was belligerent.

He yelled to Whiz. "Yo' fix things!" And then to Tom, "Git clear o' here, Tom! We got to git gittin'!"

CHAPTER 6

The Magic Chest

WHIZ WALTON was red-faced and sweaty. He came into Hamilton Quest's large room without knocking and slammed the door angrily. He swept his eyes around the room and noted Ojo sitting ill at ease on a straight-backed chair, Tom Quest at his side and Hamilton Quest seated on the davenport next to Señor Gonzales.

"Gulliver told me you were here," he said. "That big baboon can stir up more trouble in less time than any man I ever saw! Do you know what happened?" he demanded, looking at Tom.

Tom grinned. "I know that a lot of people, including some of the police, were coming toward us when I drove away with this man."

"Yeah," replied the newshound, "and they all knew I was associated with the jeep. They turned on me."

"Gulliver and I knew you could talk your way out of the situation."

"It took more than talk! I had to pay for the ruffled dignity of that cab driver, and pass out pesos to the cops."

Tom said, "I guess it was all my fault, Whiz. This fellow got away from us the other day, before we could ask him why he was snooping around our door. When I spotted him this time, I thought it would be a good idea to hang onto him."

"You've been questioning him?"

"Trying to, but we're not getting anywhere."

"He won't even tell us his name," said Hamilton Quest.

Whiz looked at Señor Gonzales. "Do you know him?" he asked. "Have you ever seen him before?"

The man from Mexico City shook his white head slowly. "No," he replied, "but I can tell you this. The fellow is badly frightened."

"What's he scared of?"

"I do not know."

"Was he snooping out of curiosity or because someone who is interested in our business sent him to spy on us?"

Gonzales shrugged his shoulders and said, "Who knows?"

"Whiz," put in Tom, "you said you saw Gulliver."

"Yeah. He was in the hotel garage, moving stuff around in the jeep so he could get at his medicine chest."

The sharp-eyed columnist saw a strange expression flit

across Tom's face, and heard the boy murmur, "Oh gosh!"

"What is it, Tom?"

"Well—when Gulliver saw we weren't getting anywhere, he said he knew of a way to make this man talk, and then he left here. I wonder if he's planning to do something with his medicine chest."

"That chest," replied Whiz dryly, "is Gulliver's port in any storm. It is his ace in the hole; the card up his sleeve. No matter what the problem may be, Gulliver always seems to find the answer in that medicine chest."

Señor Gonzales looked questioningly at the reporter, then at Tom, then at Hamilton Quest, who gave a brief description of the ancient wooden box that always accompanied Gulliver.

The chest was roughly two feet square, with a lid that swung on heavy iron hinges. Chests of this type used to be carried on the old sailing ships in the days when the captain had to serve as doctor and surgeon. The chest originally held jars and bottles filled with cures or palliatives for all known ailments. Each was identified by a number. The book of instructions outlined various symptoms and recommended the amount of a specified number to be taken or applied.

No one knew when or how the chest had come into Gulliver's possession. The big fellow had never seen the book of instructions, but by a method of trial and error, he had found certain numbers beneficial for certain ail-

ments. By his own system, he knew that one number was a headache remedy, another was good for bee or insect stings, another made a pleasant-tasting gargle when dissolved in water and apparently relieved a sore throat.

The empty containers Gulliver had filled with gun oil, boot grease, yellow soap and countless other commodities. In some of the jars, the big man kept spices and condiments as well as salt and baking powder.

There was a thud on the door. Tom opened it and Gulliver came in carrying the heavy chest, which he placed in the middle of the floor.

"Now," he said confidently as he threw back the lid, "we'll find a way to git this here squint-eyed pismire to talk." He glowered darkly at Ojo, who squirmed uneasily.

"Yo'," he said menacingly, "are troubled with what's called a stickin' tongue. It just won't waggle." He pawed through the contents of the chest.

"I got somethin' right here to fix yo' up." He brought out a knife with an ivory handle and a long, thin blade.

"Hold on, Gulliver," said Whiz. "You can't go that far!"

"Thunderation!" rumbled Gulliver. "I warn't aimin' to cut the critter's tongue *off*." His hand flicked at the wrist. The knife flew across the room and stuck in the door.

"I just aim to *loosen* his tongue a little," he said. "Here's the stuff to do it."

Tom and Whiz both shuddered inwardly when they saw a small white jar labeled number seventeen. For a long time, Gulliver had been confused about the contents of this jar and the jar identified as number seventy-one. The two looked just alike and each held a white, greasy-looking substance. The uses of the two unguents, however, were as different as they could possibly be. Number seventy-one was for the treatment of burns, while seventeen was a chemical branding salve, a fiery concoction that burned away the hair and epidermis of a steer. It was used instead of a branding iron.

Gulliver unscrewed the cap of jar number seventeen and placed it on the floor near Ojo's small, meticulously polished shoes. A wisp of smoke rose from the jar. He scooped out a gob of the white stuff with a pencil borrowed from Whiz Walton and spread it over a small area of the carpet.

"This," he explained conversationally, with a glance at Ojo, "is the eatin'est stuff I ever seen. When we put it on the hide o' cows, we have to stand by to wipe 'er off real quick because if we didn't, it'd eat right through, an' come out the other side."

There was panic in Ojo's face as he stared at the carpet. Smoke curled and eddied from the spot which Gulliver had covered with the branding compound.

Gulliver eyed the place calculatingly. "Shucks," he muttered, "it ain't as lively as it used to be. Why, if this

here stuff hadn't gone pulin' with age, it would o' et clean through that rug an' started in on the floor beneath.

"Oh, well," he continued after a pause, "I reckon it's still got spunk enough to make a man wish he'd answered a few straight questions before he got a glop of it wiped onto his back teeth."

Ojo had watched the entire performance with increasing uneasiness. Gulliver again dipped the pencil into the jar and brought it up with a clinging mass of the greasy white compound.

Ojo saw thin, wispy fumes curling up from the pencil. He started from his chair, but Gulliver pushed him back with his free hand and spoke in a rumbling voice that was filled with menace.

"Sit down. Yo' ain't goin' no place 'til we unfreeze yo' tongue."

Gulliver's act was most convincing. It was hard to believe he was anything but grimly serious. He gripped Ojo's nose between a thumb and finger and held the pencil and the gob of white stuff close to the small man's mouth.

"Now, just open yo' mouth while I swab around, an' we'll see if we can't thaw out that there tongue."

Ojo compressed his lips to a thin, hard line until Gulliver increased the pressure on his nose. Then Ojo found his voice. His pent-up fear exploded. He cried out shrilly:

"No, no, wait! Take that away!"

"Yo' ready to answer questions?"

"Yes, yes, I will answer them. I will talk!"

Gulliver stepped back, grinning. "I sort o' thought I'd have somethin' in my medicine chest that'd do the trick."

He winked at Hamilton Quest. "Now ask yo' questions, an' I reckon yo'll git straight answers."

CHAPTER 7

Death and the Black Widow

"What is your name?" asked Hamilton Quest.

"Ojo."

Señor Gonzales lifted his eyebrows. "That," he said, "means the Evil Eye. What is your other name?"

"Tizoc. The full name, señor, is Ojo Tizoc."

"Both," interjected Hamilton Quest, "are Aztec words. You don't look to me like an Aztec."

The small man explained that both his given and surnames had been handed down through many generations of intermarriage.

Further questioning brought out the fact that he had traveled the length and breadth of Mexico serving in var-

ious Government offices where his knowledge of the English, Spanish and Aztec languages was valuable.

He was quite willing to talk about his many occupations until Whiz Walton said, "Why were you snooping at our door?"

"I—" began Ojo. He paused. "I had to do it," he finished. "There was no choice."

"You were sent here?"

Ojo nodded slowly.

"By whom?"

Ojo looked at Gulliver and the others in the room. He moistened his lips, but said nothing.

"Yo' better talk," warned Gulliver, who was squatting on the floor beside his medicine chest.

In Ojo's face there was a look of terror. "Please—please, señor, it means my life if I tell you any more. I—I dare not talk."

"Is that so?" Gulliver scowled darkly. He rose to his full height and stood before the small man. "What," he demanded, jabbing Ojo's chest with a rigid forefinger, "do yo' reckon it means if yo' don't talk?"

Ojo looked about the room, desperation in his face. He glanced at the door as if considering a sudden break for freedom.

"I think you will find silence more dangerous than speech," Gonzales said. "You had better tell all you know."

Ojo sighed deeply. He looked at Tom and pointed

with a trembling finger. "You, señor, you know the man."

"I do?" replied Tom in surprise.

"You captured him. You and your friends captured the man in Florida. His name is Koerner."

Both Tom and his father voiced exclamations of surprise but they were topped by Gulliver.

"Yo' talkin' about a tall, skinny critter with a head that's big an' bald?"

Ojo nodded.

Whiz Walton had been thumbing through papers in a leather wallet. He found a photograph that had been clipped from a newspaper and showed it to Ojo, saying, "Is this the man?"

"Yes, yes, that is the man."

"He's here in Mexico?"

Another nod.

"But," put in Tom Quest, "I thought he was in prison." He looked at Whiz. "Didn't you?"

The reporter shook his head. "He got away."

"I didn't know that."

"Just before we left the States," the newshound explained, "I had a letter from my friend Jim Broderick."

Tom remembered Jim Broderick, the insurance company detective who had formerly been with the FBI. Jim had been with Tom and his friends during the adventure in the Florida Everglades when Koerner and the mem-

bers of his organization had been captured in their headquarters hidden away in the cypress swamps.

"Broderick told me how Koerner escaped, but I don't think he knew that he had fled to Mexico."

Whiz turned to Ojo. "How did he know about us? Why did he send you to spy on us? Is he here in Oaxaca?"

"He was here in Oaxaca. I was with him in the café across the street when you arrived at this hotel two days ago. He recognized you. He wondered if you had traced him here. He wanted to know if you came here looking for him."

"So he sent you to spy on us?"

"That is right, señor."

Having told enough to incur the enmity of Koerner, Ojo apparently thought his best course would be to tell all he knew, in the hope of securing the protection of Señor Gonzales, Gulliver and the others in the room.

He said, and obviously he was telling the truth, that he had been at the door for only a few seconds before Gulliver had discovered him. He had overheard the announcement of a search for the Lost Mesa and had reported this to Koerner.

Then he reached the surprising part of his narrative. Koerner, Ojo said, had known about the Lost Mesa for a long time. As a matter of fact, the former international spy was frequently in contact with an Aztec Indian named Itzacoatl who had come from the Lost Mesa.

Through Itzacoatl, Ojo had learned that the people living on the Mesa were completely dominated by a very old woman who was considered the high priestess. Her name was Mixtli. She claimed to be a direct descendant of the Aztec god of war.

In her temple she taught the ancient lore and religion of the Aztecs to a few chosen disciples. Her word was the only law and her commands were obeyed without question. Mixtli held the power of life and death over all who lived on the Lost Mesa.

Itzacoatl, whose name in Aztec meant "serpent of stone," was the most favored of all who had studied the doctrines of old Mixtli. He alone had been allowed to leave the Mesa and to travel in the outer world. Itzacoatl was working with Koerner.

It was an old belief among the Aztecs on the Mesa that someday there would come a man whose skin was white, who would lead them out of obscurity and make them once again the dominating force in Mexico. Itzacoatl thought that Koerner was that man.

Each time Itzacoatl came out of the wilderness, Koerner gave him a number of metal boxes about as large as a man's thumb and cylindrical in shape. Itzacoatl took these with him when he returned to the Lost Mesa. Ojo didn't know what the boxes contained, but they must have been of extreme importance.

Koerner's activities in Mexico went back a number of years. Ojo had known of him and his association with

Itzacoatl for at least ten years. During that time Koerner had frequently absented himself from Mexico. Sometimes he would be gone for months, but he always returned to meet with Ojo and Itzacoatl and hand over more of the little metal cylinders.

"Just what did you do for Koerner?" asked Whiz Walton.

"I do very little."

"Did he pay you?"

Ojo nodded. "From time to time," he said, "he would give me money, and he would always find me places to work. He would give me the name of a man in the Government. I would go to this man and work at good pay."

"In return for these jobs and the money you received," persisted the reporter, "what did you give Koerner?"

Ojo shook his head. "Nothing. He asked but little of me, señor. I read all the newspapers. I watch for the names of men who are in the Government."

Señor Gonzales asked. "What men?"

"There are many, señor. I have a list of half a hundred names—sometimes new names are added to the list. Whatever I read about any of these men, I cut from the paper."

"You pass these clippings on to Koerner?" It was Tom who asked the question.

Ojo said, "Yes."

"What does he do with the information? Why does he want those clippings?"

Ojo looked from Tom to Whiz and shook his head in a negative reply to both questions. "I do not know."

Gulliver muttered, "I'd give all the tea in China to know what Koerner's up to."

"Whatever it is," put in Whiz Walton, "it must be a mighty big proposition if he's been working on it for ten years."

"Yo're right about that, Whiz, an' there ain't no use tryin' to make guesses. We could think about it from now 'til hair grows on a sausage an' git no farther than we could throw a post hole."

The big man pulled his gun belt from the medicine chest and buckled it around his hips. "I aim," he went on, "to git the answers to a few questions without runnin' my boot heels over by a lot o' side-steppin'."

He pulled out his gun, made sure it was fully loaded, then dropped it back into the holster. He swung toward Ojo. "Where at will I find Koerner?"

Ojo shook his head. "You cannot find him in Oaxaca. He has left here. I do not know where he has gone."

Gulliver squinted at the small man. "Yo' don't, eh?"

"I tell you the truth!" said Ojo quickly. "He left Oaxaca soon after he learned that you were going to the Lost Mesa. Where he went, I do not know."

"It ain't like him," said Gulliver, "to leave here without tryin' to do somethin' about us. Especially if he knows we aim to find the Lost Mesa."

"Señor," Ojo's voice was lower than before. There was

something in it that caught the particular attention of everyone in the room.

Ojo looked at Gulliver and said, "Koerner made plans for you."

"What kind o' plans?"

"He gave me instructions—he gave me orders. I—I was to kill you, señor, as well as your friends."

Gulliver eyed the small man disdainfully. "Yo' were to kill *me*?" he said.

Ojo nodded soberly. "I—I could not do it. I could not carry out the orders."

"Just how did yo' aim to git the three of us?"

"I will show you," said Ojo, reaching into the side pocket of his coat. He snatched out his hand with a sharp exclamation. His eyes were wide. He stared in horror at a round black spider clinging to the back of his hand. He cried out in mortal anguish.

Tom Quest recognized that deadliest of spiders, the Black Widow. He leaped forward and slapped the creature to the floor. As it scurried across the carpet, Gulliver ended its existence with his heavy boot.

Ojo, his face drained of color, held out his hand and sobbed, "I am bitten! I am poisoned! Koerner gave me the deadly spiders. I was to place them in your beds. They were in a metal box which came open in my pocket! Oh Madre mia! I am sure to die from the poison!"

"Have you any more of those things with you?" demanded Tom.

Ojo's voice was rising to a hysterical pitch. "My pocket! My pocket!" he sobbed. "They are loose in my pocket!"

Gulliver grabbed the small man's coat by the back of the collar and jerked it off.

"I'll see about 'em!" he exclaimed. He threw the coat on the floor, then went to work on the pocket, using the butt of his revolver as a hammer.

Meanwhile, Hamilton Quest acted with quiet efficiency. From his kit he brought a hypodermic needle and a bottle of colorless fluid.

"I think," he said, "this will counteract the effect of the Black Widow poison."

"I'll help you, Dad," said Tom.

"Hold his wrist while I prepare the needle."

Tom found Ojo's hand cold and clammy with perspiration.

"Hold still," he said to the wildly sobbing man. "Hold still and we'll take care of you."

Ojo's sobs gave way to feeble moans. The muscles in his hand twitched nervously and then went limp. He tottered and would have fallen but Tom caught him and eased him into a chair.

Hamilton Quest leaned forward quickly. He felt for a pulse, then held the gleaming, silver-plated hypodermic needle close to Ojo's nostrils. It remained bright and unclouded.

"Dead," murmured the scientist.

Tom said, in a shocked tone, "Does the poison act as quickly as that?"

"No, Tom, it doesn't. The bite of the Black Widow did not kill Ojo. It was a heart attack, probably brought on by mortal fear."

Gulliver stopped operations on the pocket of Ojo's coat. He turned it inside out and eyed the remains of several spiders and the flattened-out receptacle that had held them. He rumbled angrily.

"So Koerner wanted to turn them critters loose on us. That gits my bristles up. When I catch up with that Koerner, I'll twist his head around till he can scratch the back o' his neck with his front teeth!"

CHAPTER 8

Discovery at Noon

"Doggone," rumbled Gulliver in his throaty, rasping voice. "This here country is enough to sweat a man down like a tallow candle."

"It's plenty hot," agreed Whiz Walton from the small rear seat of the jeep. "How far do you think we've gone since daybreak?"

"Twenty-five miles by the speedometer," grunted the big man as he wrenched the steering wheel to brush past a large tree. "But most of it's been ziggle-zaggin' right to left an' back again. As the crow flies, we ain't made no more headway than a slow snail climbin' up a slick log."

"It was your idea to bring the jeep."

Gulliver swung around in his seat and glowered at the reporter. "Yo'," he demanded, "don't like that idea?"

"We'd have made more headway on foot."

"This here jeep is totin' five—six hundred pounds o' vittles an' campin' gear, to say nothin' o' the guns an' ammunition, an' the camera stuff. Split that three ways an' yo'll see what sort o' pack yo'd have to lug, was we to travel on foot!"

"Look out!" cried Tom Quest sharply.

Gulliver turned eyes front and whipped the small car to the left of a boulder that had loomed up suddenly.

"The going's getting tougher all the time," observed the newshound. "The trees seem to be closing in. The chances are we'll have to hoof it sooner or later."

"We got machetes to cut a path if need be."

"Uh-huh," answered Whiz. "But the effectiveness of a machete is limited. That boulder we just passed, for example, and the tree you brushed a minute before. You won't move obstacles like those with any machete."

"If we come up to somethin' that my jeep won't push aside, or a machete won't cut down, I'll bust away with dynamite."

It was nearly noon of the third day since leaving Oaxaca and the fifth day since Ojo's fatal heart attack. Señor Gonzales had called the authorities to Hamilton Quest's hotel suite and disposed of the routine formalities in connection with the Aztec's death. The verdict of a heart attack had been accepted without question. Nothing had been said about the Black Widow spiders or Ojo's association with Koerner.

Two days had been spent in a search for the lean fugi-

tive from justice. Several shopkeepers in Oaxaca, when shown a photograph of Koerner, admitted that they had seen the man recently.

Tom Quest and Whiz Walton had located the place where Koerner had been staying, but on going there had found evidence of the hurried departure Ojo had mentioned.

After Ojo's revelations, the finding of the Lost Mesa became of paramount importance. It was now obvious that Koerner unquestionably was engaged in long-range plotting of a most secretive nature. He would kill to protect his secret.

While Tom, Gulliver and Whiz Walton searched in Oaxaca for a clue to Koerner's whereabouts, Hamilton Quest and Señor Gonzales pooled their sources of information to perfect the chart that showed where the Lost Mesa might be found.

Tom pulled out the chart when Gulliver brought his jeep to a bucking halt with the sun directly overhead.

"It's noon," Gulliver announced as he stepped out of the jeep. "Time we et."

Whiz Walton leaned forward to look at the chart over Tom's shoulder. "Are we getting anywhere?" he asked.

"I don't know," the boy replied, shaking his head dubiously. He glanced at a compass which he wore on a leather strap around his wrist. "I've tried to follow the route, but we've had to make so many twists and turns, I'm not sure whether we're going in the right direction or

not. I think we're all right as long as we keep going uphill."

Tom pointed to a circle that had been drawn in pencil on the map.

"According to Dad, the Lost Mesa is somewhere inside this circle. We must be pretty close to the edge of the circle by this time."

"We are," put in Gulliver. "Now git out an' stretch yo' legs while yo' got time. We're stoppin' short an' eatin' quick."

The jeep had traveled at a good pace on the first day of the trip. The second day had brought much wilder country of a tropical nature. A number of deer had been seen, and several mountain lions and boars had been flushed by the roaring jeep. Once, Tom had caught a quick glimpse of a jaguar streaking through the trees; rabbits and squirrels were everywhere. The cries and calls and shouts of parrot, quail and heron were identified against an almost constant orchestration of monkeys chattering among the leaves overhead.

Travel during the morning of the third day had been more difficult. The trees had become increasingly dense and the ground more treacherous. On three occasions, Gulliver had been forced to use the creeper gear to pull the jeep through boggy ground.

Both Tom and Whiz had unvoiced misgivings. If travel conditions continued to deteriorate, the jeep and much of the equipment would have to be abandoned.

Gulliver had placed his medicine chest on the grass to serve as a table.

"I'm going to take your advice, Gulliver, and stretch my legs," said Tom. "Yell when you're ready."

"I'll go with you, Tom," said Whiz. "There's no use offering to help Gulliver when he's setting up a meal."

"I learned that a long time ago." Tom grinned. "He doesn't want interference."

"I'll have chuck ready in about five minutes," the big man warned, "so don't yo' two go far away."

They were in a comparatively open area bounded on three sides by trees and on the fourth by a muddy-looking pond.

"Is that on the chart?" asked Whiz, pointing to the water.

"No, there's not much of anything on the chart."

"Your father said this was virtually unexplored country."

Tom nodded.

He and Whiz walked toward the pond where a huge tree was growing near the bank. A giant alligator slithered through the mud and disappeared beneath the water as Tom and the reporter approached.

"Ugh," shuddered Whiz. "I hate those things."

"Alligators?"

The newshound nodded. "I like animals," he said, "as long as they have fur. But alligators, crocodiles and snakes—they give me the creeps."

"Whiz, look at the size of that tree," said Tom, pointing.

"It's a lulu."

The two stopped at the base of the woody giant. "I think," said Tom, "there are some climbing spikes in the jeep. If I could shin up to the top of that tree, I bet I could see a mighty long way."

"Now that," replied Whiz, "sounds like a smart idea."

The trunk near the ground was about three feet in diameter and free of branches for thirty feet or more.

"If I could get as far as those branches, I'd be all right. The rest would be easy."

Tom started around the tree to inspect the other side, then stopped suddenly and exclaimed, "Whiz!"

"Huh?"

"Look here!"

A map drawn in red ink on waterproofed paper was pinned to the tree at eye level by a clasp knife.

"Holy mackerel," Whiz exclaimed. "Someone's been here ahead of us!"

He jerked the paper loose, leaving the knife stuck in the rough bark of the tree. The map at first made little sense. Large sections of the paper were covered with peculiar little figures shaped like clouds that might have been meant to represent trees and woodland. There were other sections studded with marks like bird tracks. Tom suggested that these might mean tall grass or swampland.

In one corner, an arrow had been drawn to indicate the

north. At another place on the map, the head of an alligator had been drawn in the center of an irregular oval at the edge of which there was a small circle.

Whiz held the map with the arrow pointing up. The entire map had been done in waterproof ink with the exception of a pencil line that started from the northwest corner and snaked diagonally to the small firm circle near the center. Here the pencil line turned sharply to the left, following the edge of the oval that surrounded the alligator head. There was small lettering along the pencil line.

"Let me see if I can read it," Tom said.

"It's mighty small lettering." Whiz handed the map to Tom.

"A magnifying glass would help," Tom said as he held the paper close to his eyes. "Let me see. The first letter is I; the second is a T; the third—I've got it!"

"What is it?"

"The word," Tom said, "is 'Itzacoatl,' and it's followed by an arrow!"

"Itzacoatl!" repeated Whiz. "That's the name of the Aztec Koerner's supposed to be palsy-walsy with! The big shot from the Lost Mesa! You remember Ojo telling us about him!"

"Then this," put in Tom quickly, "must be the route —the route to the Lost Mesa!"

"Could be."

"Now this map makes sense. See here, Whiz. This oval

shape must mean that muddy pond where we saw the alligator."

"That being the case, the circle right here would represent the big tree."

Tom nodded vigorously. "You're right, Whiz."

The reporter traced the pencil line with his index finger.

"This is the direction we've been traveling," he said. "Roughly a southeasterly course. And this—" he jabbed the paper, "—is where we are right now. We're supposed to make a sharp turn around that tree and skirt the alligator pond."

"Golly, it's lucky we found this." Tom raised his voice. "Hey, Gulliver, come here on the double! We have something to show you!"

CHAPTER 9

The Mysterious Map

GULLIVER scowled at the map for some time without speaking, then looked at Tom and demanded, "Where'd yo' git this?"

"Right there." Tom pointed to the clasp knife sticking in the tree trunk. "It was pinned to the tree by that knife."

Gulliver pulled out the clasp knife and examined it. It was commonplace in nature, the type that might be purchased in almost any hardware store. The blade was bright and shiny and showed no sign of use.

"It looks," observed the big man, "like a brand-new knife."

"Not a very good one," put in Whiz Walton.

"Junk," Gulliver said contemptuously. "It's the sort o'

stuff we bought to use as trade goods when we went amongst them Injuns in South America."

"If it had been stuck in that tree for any length of time," Tom said, "it would be rusty."

"It was put there recent, Tom, an' I'd admire to know how come. Maybe if I look around, I can find some footprints."

Gulliver hunched low and studied the ground near the base of the big tree. The knee-high grass was broken down where Whiz and Tom had walked, but the earth was too hard to take a footprint.

"Find anything?" asked Whiz.

"Naw, nothin' at all, but I aim to expand my lookin'." Gulliver moved toward the muddy pond. "They's just a chance," he said, "that the critter who posted that map might o' put a foot down near the water where the ground is likely to be softer."

"I don't get it," muttered Whiz in a voice too low for Gulliver to hear. "Gulliver doesn't seem at all pleased with the discovery of that map."

Tom shook his head. "Maybe he figures it's too good to be true. What do you think, Whiz?"

Whiz held up his left hand with the fingers spread out. "Look at the facts," he said. "First," he pointed to his extended thumb, "Ojo told us that Koerner had some dealings with the Aztecs on the Lost Mesa." He touched his index finger. "Second, Koerner knew we were interested in the Lost Mesa."

Tom nodded. "Ojo told him that much."

The reporter touched his middle finger. "Three, Koerner left Oaxaca in a hurry. Four, he knew the Aztec Itzacoatl. Put those points together and what do you have? Itzacoatl found out somehow that Koerner would be heading for the Mesa, so he left that chart on the tree to show the trail."

"That sounds reasonable," Tom said, "though you'd think Koerner would know the trail by now. You don't think," he continued, "that the sign was put on that tree just to mislead us?"

Whiz shook his head. "Not logical, Tom," he said.

"Koerner knew we'd be looking for the Mesa."

"Yeah, but he didn't know we'd come this way. If we had gone just fifty feet to the right or left, we'd have missed this clearing entirely."

Tom looked at the curious map again and after a lengthy pause said, "Maybe not."

"How's that?"

Tom drew a pencil from the pocket of his shirt. "Here," he said, tracing the pencil line on the map. "We came along this trail just about where this pencil line is. Now if we had been traveling to the right of this line, we would have been blocked by the alligator pond. To get around it, we would have had to go either to the right or left. Maybe we couldn't go to the right because of swamp or something. These signs on the map look like swampland. We would have had to go around the pond by turn-

ing to our left, which would have brought us right to this clearing."

Whiz Walton elevated his eyebrows, pursed his lips and murmured, "Um-m."

Tom moved his pencil to the left of the trail on the map. "If we had started out to the left," he said, moving the pencil, "we would have wound up somewhere in here."

The point of the pencil was on an area covered with the thin lines that looked like bird tracks.

"Swamp?"

Tom nodded. "To get around that," he said, "we would probably have had to cut to the right, in which case—"

"We would have wound up in this clearing," finished the reporter. He pushed his hat higher on his forehead. "According to your reasoning, Tom, no matter how we started out we would have finished in this clearing. That being the case, Koerner could have planted the map here purposely to mislead us."

"At least, there's reason to be suspicious about the map. I—"

Tom's speech was cut off when Gulliver bellowed from the edge of the pool.

"Yo' two! Come over here!"

"He's found something," said Whiz Walton, striding toward Gulliver.

"What is it, Gulliver?" called Tom.

"I found 'em!" the big man replied.

"Footprints?"

"Look there," Gulliver pointed to the five-foot strip of mud that formed a beach between the grassland and the water's edge. Several footprints were discernible.

"White man's boots," said Gulliver. "New ones. Yo' can see for yo'self. The heels ain't rounded none."

"They're big," observed the reporter.

"An Apache taught me to cut sign. The critter that wore them boots had a foot that was most as long as mine, but uncommon narrow."

"How big was the man?"

"Judgin' from his stride, he was tall, but judgin' from the depth o' the footprint, he didn't have much tallow on his carcass. He must o' been just skin an' bone."

Gulliver looked at the others significantly. "Do either o' yo' two know a man that'd fit that description?"

"Koerner."

Gulliver nodded.

"That map may have been posted to guide him," the columnist said thoughtfully.

"Maybe." Gulliver didn't sound convinced. He rasped his fingernail against his chin. "An' maybe not," he finished.

"We'd be chumps to disregard that map."

Gulliver squinted one eye as he looked at Whiz. "Sometimes," he drawled, "I can be pretty much of a chump."

"You don't think we should follow the route that's marked?"

Gulliver once more rasped his whiskers reflectively. He eyed the pond, which seemed to be very long and very narrow. At the widest point, it was less than a hundred yards from shore to shore. Standing in the clearing at one end, it was impossible to judge its length. The tepid water extended on and on until it disappeared in thin mist.

The recommended route followed a narrow ribbon of beach between the water's edge and a dense growth of trees and tangled underbrush.

"We couldn't take the jeep," said Tom. "The beach is too narrow. We'd have to walk."

"Not only that," Whiz said, "we'd have to walk in single file."

"Maybe we could do some clearin'."

"But, Gulliver, we couldn't clear a path through those trees."

Gulliver glanced at Whiz Walton, then back at the tropical growth. "My jeep could push through that there underbrush an' likely nudge down the smaller trees."

"To hear him talk you'd think he had a bulldozer," Whiz said to Tom.

Gulliver ignored the comment. "The big trees would take some blastin'. We could git the jeep through all right enough, but it'd be almighty slow."

"Yeah," agreed the newshound caustically, "it almighty would."

The fact that Gulliver had reached a decision was signified by his hitching up his trousers.

"What's it to be?" asked Tom.

"Tom, I got the grub spread out yonder near the jeep. I'll take some along for munchin', an' follow that there route a little ways to see how she looks, while yo' an' Whiz are eatin'. Maybe the beach'll widen out enough so's we can travel in the jeep. If so, we'll bust our way through to the wide part."

"We could all go," Tom suggested.

"Nope. Yo' two wait here an' keep an eye on things." Gulliver crossed the clearing to his beloved jeep. He found a machete and a scabbard which he suspended from his cartridge belt. Then from the improvised table he took as much of the food as he could conveniently carry.

"Yo' two," he said, "wait right here an' don't go explorin'. I'll be back as soon as I have a look-see."

Tom and Whiz watched Gulliver as long as he was in sight. Then, when the big man disappeared beyond a slight bend in the shore line, they turned their attention to the noonday meal.

The meal was calculated to supply a maximum amount of energy with a minimum of bulk. The food was good and well prepared, but Tom ate without enthusiasm. An hour ago he had been hungry, but now his appetite was gone. Somewhere deep inside he sensed a vague apprehension.

Perhaps it came from the knowledge that Koerner, a

deadly enemy, recently had been in this same clearing. Koerner, at this very moment, might be close at hand. The trees beyond the clearing furnished shelter for wild beasts of many kinds. They might be hiding Koerner, too, or Koerner might be somewhere on the trail Gulliver had taken.

Tom was concerned, not about his own safety, but about his big friend Gulliver. Gulliver was strong. He could handle several men of Koerner's size in almost any kind of battle, but Koerner didn't fight like other men. He didn't expose himself to danger. If Koerner struck, it would be in some silent, subtle manner that Gulliver would have no chance to combat. Black Widow spiders, for example. Tom shuddered involuntarily as he recalled the scene in the Oaxaca hotel. Koerner had already struck once. There was every reason to suppose that he would try again to take the lives of those who sought to solve the mystery of the Lost Mesa.

"What's the matter, Tom?"

Tom looked at Whiz, who was seated on the grass with his long legs bent up, tailor fashion.

"I—I guess I was borrowing trouble," the boy admitted sheepishly.

"Had all you want to eat?"

"Yes."

"You didn't eat much."

"I wasn't hungry. And how about yourself? You've barely nibbled."

"Maybe," said the reporter shrewdly, "my appetite

went the same place yours did. The more I think about it, the less I like the way that map was stuck up on the tree for us to find."

"Whiz," Tom said quickly, "if that is true—if Koerner did put it up there for us to find—"

"I didn't mean it necessarily that way," cut in the reporter.

"No matter how you meant it, Whiz, the chart will do one of two things."

"One of two things?"

"Yes. If it is on the level, it will lead us to the Lost Mesa, but if it was put there by Koerner, for us to find, it will lead us—I mean Gulliver—" Tom paused, and then continued in a low voice, "I wonder where it will lead him."

CHAPTER 10

The Pitfall

GULLIVER hated walking, so he moved fast to bring his trip of exploration to an end as quickly as possible. He was in a black mood. The prospect of leaving the jeep behind for the last leg of the trip to the Mesa was in no way satisfactory.

"I'm hopin'," he told himself, "that the map is downright wrong an' misleadin'."

He wolfed the last of his food and grumbled in disgust. In his haste to get started, he had forgotten to season his own share of the midday meal with the hot spices and condiments he favored.

"Pulin' food," he growled as he strode along. "I don't know how Tom an' Whiz can eat the stuff without pepper sauce. It's got no more authority than a sick kitten."

The beach became a little wider. The water rippled

twenty yards ahead, and the ugly snout of an alligator appeared. Gulliver dropped his hand. His fingers closed around the polished walnut handle of his six gun.

"Come on, yo' ugly-lookin' critter," he challenged. "Come on out o' that there water, an' let's us argue the right o' way."

The 'gator blinked lazily but refused to accept the challenge, and dropped beneath the surface, much to Gulliver's disappointment.

Another quarter of a mile, and then the underbrush closed in almost to the water's edge. The pond at that point was quite shallow. Gulliver could easily have waded around the underbrush, but this was not in keeping with his mood. He welcomed the chance to bring his sharp machete into play. Three vicious sweeps of the broad blade cleared the path, then Gulliver moved on. Soon the nature of the shore line changed. The mud gave way to grass and the underbrush became less dense.

Gulliver calculated that he had traveled about two miles from the clearing. He was undecided how much farther he would go. He was considering this problem when it happened.

Without warning, the ground beneath him opened up and Gulliver was falling. He had been striding through the grass and then an instant later he was in mid-air, dropping into a pit.

He landed jarringly and sprawled on hard-packed dirt amid a crackling tangle of dead twigs and branches. Bits

of grass, clods of dirt and chunks of sod showered down about him.

When he recovered from the shock of surprise, he scrambled to his feet, fists clenched and jaw jutting in anger. Then he realized where he was and what had happened.

The pit was about ten feet in diameter and circular in shape. The opening was six or seven feet above his head. The walls were slick and clean. It was a pitfall that had been cunningly concealed by branches that would snap beneath weight. Branches that had been covered by a thin layer of sod.

Gulliver surmised that he had fallen into a trap designed to catch an animal.

"Them Aztecs," he growled. "They likely figured to catch themselves some meat. Now, how in tarnation am I goin' to git out?"

Never in his whole life had Gulliver been troubled by lack of confidence in his ability to meet and conquer every problem. His self-confidence, coupled with his mighty muscles, had carried him through fights and over obstacles that would have downed other men.

The pitfall presented a problem. Gulliver would have to figure out a means of escape, and he would lose a little time, but not for an instant did he consider his situation a serious predicament. The thought that he might perish at the bottom of the hole never even entered his head.

Growling in annoyance, the big man kicked the twigs

and branches into a heap at one side of the hole. The dead wood snapped and crackled when he stepped to the top of the pile and raised his hand as high as possible.

"Humph!" he grunted. "I'm four-five feet too short to reach the top. Couldn't even jump that far. Couldn't make 'er even if I had springs on my heels."

He stepped down from the unsteady pile. "Can't waste much time here," he mused. "Tom Quest is likely to worry if I ain't back in that clearin' pretty soon." Feeling the smooth wall with his calloused hand, he said, "Guess I'll have to git out the slow way by diggin' toe holds."

His machete came into use. He jabbed the point of the blade into the wall about three feet from the ground and excavated a niche about a foot in width and half of that in depth. The soil was easy to dig. It was sandy loam that crumbled at the touch.

Gulliver dug a second step a couple of feet above the first. Then he scooped out a place above his head. It provided a grip for his fingers so he could hold himself against the wall while standing in the lower steps.

"Now I'm about set to start up. I'll dig the rest o' the steps as I go an' I'll be out o' this doggoned hole in no time."

He was doomed to disappointment. As soon as his weight was shifted to the foot he placed in the lowest niche, the narrow shelf of earth collapsed.

Gulliver snarled impatiently.

He went to work with his machete and cut another

step. Though it was twice as large and twice as deep, it was no more satisfactory than the first. It, too, collapsed beneath Gulliver's weight. Gripping his machete, he crossed to the opposite side of the hole in the hope that the soil would be of a more substantial texture. Swinging his blade viciously, he cut a shelf much larger than before, then slapped it with the flat side of the knife to pack it down.

The air in the pit was stifling. Gulliver was somewhat breathless, and his clothes were soaked with sweat. "If this one don't hold," he told himself, "they ain't no use o' my tryin' to git out this way."

He placed one big foot on the new ledge. Then he shifted his weight ever so slowly. Suddenly, the foot dropped down amid a shower of pulverized soil and pebbles.

Gulliver had an extensive vocabulary of colorful expressions to fit practically every situation, but now he could find nothing to express his complicated emotions. He was angry and disgusted. He was hot and tired. He was impatient. And above all, he was concerned about the worry he might cause Tom Quest by being away from the clearing overlong.

"I give up," he said finally. "I'll just have to sound off a call for help."

He drew his heavy gun and fired at the opening that loomed so tantalizingly a few feet overhead. The roar of the gun was deafening in the confines of the pit. He fired

again, and then sent a third shot rocketing after the others. Three shots fired in succession was a signal that Tom and Whiz would understand. It meant "You're needed. Come at once."

Gulliver flipped open his gun, ejected the heavy shells and replaced them with fresh ones from his cartridge belt. He holstered the weapon and drew out his heavy watch.

"Three o'clock," he observed. "I'll wait about half an hour. By that time, Tom an' Whiz should be well on their way here. I'll unravel some more shells at half past three so's they can follow the sound."

This having been decided, the big man sat down on the floor of the cave, his back resting against the wall that had betrayed him.

On schedule at half past three, he fired three times. Fifteen minutes later, he fired again, and after that he maintained a schedule of single shots spaced by two minutes.

At four o'clock, he wondered what was keeping Tom and Whiz. At four-fifteen, the wonder gave way to concern. At half past four, Gulliver was really worried.

"This is gittin' downright serious," he said. "Somethin' has happened to Tom Quest! That there boy's in trouble an' he's needin' me! An' here I sit like a doggoned bear in hibernation. I got to do somethin' about it—an' fast!"

CHAPTER 11

The Shifting Wind

TIME DRAGGED HEAVILY in the clearing. Tom Quest and Whiz Walton packed away the things that had been used for the simple noonday meal. They stowed these and Gulliver's medicine chest in the jeep. After that, there was nothing to do but wait.

The reporter sat on the ground with his long legs stretched out in front and his back supported by a tree. He snapped a wooden match into fire with his thumbnail and lighted a cigarette.

"If you don't mind," he said, exhaling a stream of smoke, "I'll bring my notebook up to date."

"Go ahead," said Tom. "I wonder how long Gulliver will be gone," he added.

Whiz shook his head slowly. "Your guess is as good as

mine. He didn't say when he'd be back, but I don't think he will go far on foot."

Tom grinned. "Gulliver," he said, "hates walking."

The columnist took out a pencil and began writing in a pocket notebook. Tom strolled across the clearing to the water's edge. It was a fine day for a swim, but the muddy water, peopled as it was with alligators, offered no temptation.

He returned to the jeep and got out tools and cleaning rags. To occupy the time, he cleaned the car, then checked the oil and water levels. He inspected the battery, the hose connections and the wiring. He checked the spark plugs and the timing, and he oiled and greased the jeep from bumper to bumper. When he had put away the tools and washed his hands, he looked at his wrist watch.

"Hey, Whiz," he called, "it's three o'clock."

The reporter had been dozing. He opened his eyes, stretched out his arms and yawned prodigiously.

"Three o'clock, eh?" he repeated. "I wonder where the big guy is."

A couple of miles away, Gulliver was firing his pistol as a signal of distress. Most of the sound was choked in the narrow confines of the pit. The rest was absorbed by the trees and brush that grew between the pitfall and the clearing. Those shots and the ones that followed went quite unheard by Tom and Whiz.

The feeling of uneasiness that Tom had known at

noon soon after Gulliver's departure had subsided while he busied himself around the jeep, but now it returned stronger than before.

"I wish—" he said slowly, then paused.

"You wish what, Tom?"

"Well, I—if I knew that we were going to travel on foot, I could unload the things we'll have to carry and cover the rest of the duffel with a tarpaulin."

"You know Gulliver. We won't go on foot if there's the slightest chance of traveling in the car."

"If that map is accurate, we'll *have* to go on foot. We couldn't possibly get the car through the trees along the edge of the pond."

"I wish Gulliver would say that."

"What do you mean, Whiz?"

"You're absolutely right, Tom. We can't possibly get the jeep through those trees, but maybe Gulliver won't admit it. He'll probably try to cut and blast a path."

The two walked to the edge of the clearing and advanced a short distance through the trees along the route that would have been followed if it had not been for the discovery of the map. Then they returned to the big tree on which the map had been found, and looked along the narrow beach.

"Still no sign of Gulliver," murmured Tom. "Whiz, do you suppose something could have happened to him?"

"You're worried, aren't you, Tom?"

"Yes," the boy said frankly, "I am. I've had a funny

feeling about that map ever since we found it. The fact that Koerner was here doesn't help any. It would be just his game to try to mislead us."

"I—"

"Wait!" Tom cut off Whiz Walton's speech. "Listen, Whiz. Do you hear something?"

The reporter cocked his head to one side and listened for a moment. "Birds," he muttered, "monkeys, some frogs—"

"There's something else."

The sound was almost imperceptible. At first, Whiz Walton thought it might be distant thunder, and said so.

Tom shook his head. "It isn't thunder. It's too regular. Whiz, it sounds to me like drums."

"Drums?" A pause. Then, "You're right, Tom. It sounds like Indian drums."

"The ancient Aztecs," Tom said breathlessly, "used drums for signaling."

Whiz pursed his lips in an exclamatory whistle, then spoke in a low voice. "Holy mackerel! Maybe we're closer to the Mesa than we thought."

The slight breeze changed its direction and took with it the distant throbbing of the Aztec drums. After a lengthy pause, during which both Tom and the reporter listened in vain, the boy said, "I read somewhere that those drums can be heard for miles. There's something peculiar about the sound that makes it carry."

"I couldn't tell the direction of the sound, could you?"

Tom said, "No, but I noticed the surface of the pond."

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"The ripples showed the direction of the breeze. It's changed now." Tom pointed toward the route that Gulliver had traveled on foot.

"Now the wind—what there is of it—is coming from that direction. But when we heard the drums, it was blowing across the pond."

"Coming from the southeast."

Tom nodded.

"The direction we were traveling."

"Yes."

"In that case, Gulliver has gone the wrong way."

"Confound it, Whiz, why doesn't he come back? I have half a mind to go after him. Look at the time. It's four thirty-six!"

Whiz was sniffing the air appraisingly.

"Smell something?" Tom inquired.

"Yeah, I think I do." The reporter sniffed again. "My eyes could be sharper and my hearing could be keener, but when it comes to the sense of smell I can't be beat. Tom, I smell smoke. It's getting stronger every minute."

Tom looked around the clearing. "I don't see anything burning."

"It's wood smoke. Someone must be camped near here."

"I can smell it!" Tom said. "You're right, Whiz. I know what I'm going to do."

"What?"

"You wait here."

Tom was off like a deer, running to the jeep. He pawed through several boxes before he found what he wanted, then he rejoined the reporter near the big tree.

"What have you got there, Tom?"

"Spikes," replied the boy. "The kind that telephone men use to climb poles."

He sat on the ground and strapped the iron spikes to the inside of his legs. "I'm going to climb that tree. Maybe I can spot a campfire."

"What about your binoculars? Wouldn't they help?"

Tom said, "Yes, I forgot about them."

"I'll get them out of the jeep," Whiz offered, "while you're getting ready to climb."

Great tears welled up in Gulliver's deep-set eyes and rolled down his cheeks. His eyes were bloodshot, and his throat was raw, but he stuck gamely to his task. He had exhausted the cartridges in his gun belt and as a last resort had decided to try smoke signals. He had cleared a space on the dirt floor and built a fire from the plentiful supply of dead wood. The heat had almost overwhelmed him.

When the fire was blazing high, he had covered it with some of the chunks of sod that had fallen with him into the hole.

He had choked and coughed violently for some time,

and had found relief only by lying flat on his stomach with his face pressed close to the damp earth in the corner where the smooth walls of the pitfall met the floor.

When the smoke began to thin, he kept it controlled and managed to send a satisfactory column of smoke out of the pit without asphyxiating himself.

"Ain't much chance that Tom'll see the smoke," he muttered after some time, "but I got to do somethin'. I can't just sit an' twiddle my thumbs.

"It could be that Tom didn't hear my gunshots. I sure hope that's the case, because if he heard 'em, he'd o' been here by now, unless he's met up with trouble."

Using a stick as a poker, Gulliver pushed back the layer of sod and added a handful of twigs to the glowing embers. He kept the fire uncovered until the twigs were burning brightly, then dropped the sod back in place.

At half past five, the big man for the first time felt discouraged. He sighed heavily.

"Might as well let 'er burn out. If anyone was comin', they'd o'—" He stopped abruptly when he heard his name called in a familiar voice.

"Tom!" he bellowed in reply. "Tom! Where yo' at?"

The answer came quickly. "Gulliver!"

There was a sound of running steps, and then the faces of Tom and Whiz appeared at the overhead opening.

"Well, how do you like that?" said the reporter.

"Yo,' Tom! Yo', Whiz!"

"A fine thing," Whiz went on. "Why didn't you tell

us you wanted privacy? What's the idea of digging yourself a hole and hiding like that?"

"Git me out o' here," replied the big man. "I'll grab ahold o' them fool questions with my right fist an' ram 'em down yo' gullet! Yo' got a rope?"

Tom said, "No."

"Then shove that lunkhead newshound down here. I can git out by standin' on his shoulders."

"That," retorted Whiz, "would be just dandy. How do you figure you'd get me out?"

"I didn't figure on it." Then Gulliver ended the repartee by adding, "Yo' told me yo' didn't bring a rope. What did yo' bring?"

"Not much of anything. Whiz is wearing his gun and gun belt, but aside from that—"

"Yeah," interrupted the irrepressible reporter. "At least we can put you out of your misery so you won't face slow starvation in the bottom of that hole." More seriously he added, "Maybe we can make a rope by tying our shirts together."

"It wouldn't hold, an' besides, yo' two couldn't haul me out o' here. Yo'd have to have a rope long enough to hitch around a tree. They's aplenty of it in the jeep."

"Wait," Tom suggested. "I have a better idea. You're wearing your machete, aren't you, Gulliver?"

"Yeah."

"Toss it out."

"What yo' goin' to do, Tom?"

"I'll cut down a sapling and make a pole. Then you can climb out."

"That's the ticket," Gulliver agreed enthusiastically. "That's using yo' head, Tom. Cut 'er long enough to reach from down here to the top o' this hole an' I'll be able to shinny up without no trouble. Stand back now. I'm throwin' up the machete."

Gulliver stood at one side of the pit and tossed up the broad blade, which landed on the grass near Tom Quest's feet. Gripping it in both hands, the boy used it as an axe to cut down a near-by sapling about three inches in diameter. He lopped off the lower branches, leaving short stubs that might serve Gulliver as steps, and then cut off the leafy upper part.

Whiz Walton helped him carry the fifteen-foot pole to the edge of the pit and lower one end. A moment later Gulliver was out of the death trap and with his friends.

He glowered darkly at Whiz Walton as he slapped the dust from his clothing. "Yo', Whiz," he warned, "I expect yo're thinkin' o' some downright smart things to say about an overgrowed galoot that can't see a pitfall right beneath his nose."

The newshound grinned without comment.

"I'm tellin' yo', I ain't in no mood for wisecracks, an' I'm tellin' yo' somethin' else. We're goin' back to my jeep an' look for that Lost Mesa no matter what we find on any map."

"I think," Tom said, "the map was wrong."

Gulliver looked sharply at the boy. "Why do yo' say that, Tom?"

"Don't you?"

"Yeah, but with me it's different. I just got a hunch that that map was wrong. Yo' must have some definite reason for thinkin' so."

"I have."

"What is it?"

"We came here looking for you because Whiz smelled smoke."

"Yo' didn't hear my gunshots?"

"No, but we *did* smell smoke when the wind blew from here toward the clearing. I climbed that big tree with the binoculars and saw a column of smoke rising from the ground. That's what brought us here."

"Tom, yo're checkerboardin'. I asked yo' why yo' figured the Lost Mesa warn't in this direction. Instead of answerin' up straightforward, yo're sunfishin' an' sidewindin'!"

Tom laughed. "But I'm not. The point is simply this. The breeze was blowing from this direction. But just a few minutes earlier it was from the southeast."

"That's the direction we was headin' before we found that map."

Tom nodded. "We heard drums," he said simply.

"Yo' what!" exclaimed Gulliver. "Yo' heard drums?" He looked at the reporter, who nodded confirmation.

"Drums," Tom said, "just like the ones Dad told us about. Ceremonial drums of the ancient Aztecs."

"That does it," Gulliver said decisively, giving a hitch to his trousers. "We still got several hours o' daylight to cover plenty o' ground. Let's go back to the jeep an' git gittin'."

Gulliver didn't know it—neither did Tom or Whiz—but the jeep was no longer in the clearing. The little car and all it contained had been silently towed away by strong men with copper-colored skins who were members of a civilization that had been cut off from the world since the conquest of Mexico by Cortez and his Spanish followers.

CHAPTER 12

The Lost Mesa

GULLIVER led the way along the back trail toward the clearing. His strides were long and purposeful. His huge hands made into fists swung at his sides. His mouth was set and his chin jutted belligerently. He had the appearance of a man who was looking for trouble and hoping to find it.

Convinced now that Koerner had left the map in the clearing to mislead him and his companions, Gulliver strongly suspected that the enemy had prepared the pitfall for the sole purpose of trapping all three who sought the Lost Mesa.

Tom Quest followed Gulliver, and Whiz Walton, wearing a .38-caliber police-positive Colt, brought up the rear. The big man in the lead rounded a curve in the shore line to come within view of the clearing.

"Yo', Tom," he called over his shoulder, "what did yo' do with the jeep?"

"Cleaned it," replied the boy promptly. "I wiped it off, then checked the timing and—"

"Where did yo' put it?"

"I didn't move it." Tom swerved slightly to the left to look past the big man toward the clearing. "It's gone!" he exclaimed.

Gulliver broke into a run. Despite his bulk and lumbering gait he covered the ground with amazing speed that quickly brought him to the center of the clearing at the end of the alligator pond. He stopped and looked from one end of the clearing to the other.

"It *is* gone," he bellowed incredulously.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "Where is it?"

"Yo're askin' me?" Gulliver thundered. "How in tarnation do yo' expect me to know where it is! I left 'er here with yo' two! Now she's gone. Someone has stole my jeep! Just let me git my hands on that double-distilled sidewinder an' I'll throw him so high he'll die o' starvation comin' down!"

"Maybe there are tracks," Tom suggested. "Let's go and see."

Walking from the edge of the clearing at the boy's side, Whiz Walton said, "I don't like the looks of things, Tom. Koerner must be mighty close."

"He must be the one who took the jeep," Tom said.

"I don't know of any other white man who might be in this part of the country."

"It's unlikely," the reporter observed, "that pre-Conquest Aztecs would know how to drive a car."

"How in tarnation could anyone drive that jeep o' mine away without us hearin' it?" Gulliver was walking next to Whiz.

"We didn't hear your gunshots," the newshound said.

"That's different. My gun was muffled by bein' in the pit, an' what's more, my ears are trained to the sound o' my jeep like a she-bear can catch the whimper of a cub."

"Here's where it stood," Tom said as the three stopped. "Right here is where I cleaned it. You can see where I spilled some oil on the grass."

There was a black smear of dirty crankcase oil that Tom had let out for testing purposes. Beyond that point tracks could be seen where the heavy tires had crushed the grass. And the grass between the tracks had been bent and broken as if many men had walked there.

"Leastwise," grumbled Gulliver, "we got some tracks to follow an' they're goin' straight on in the direction we aimed to travel."

"We'll follow them?" queried Whiz Walton.

Gulliver said, "Without that jeep we've got no food, no ammunition, no campin' gear, no nothin'. Not even my medicine chest."

The reporter sighed. "Along with everything else, our

canteens are gone, and I was counting on a nice long drink of clear water."

"Humph," snorted Gulliver. "I've been eatin' dirt an' breathin' smoke 'til I'm as thirsty as a mud hen on a tin roof."

"The pond—" began Whiz.

"I wouldn't touch that water. It looks pizenous. They was some pills in my medicine chest," Gulliver added wistfully, "that'd make 'er safe to drink."

"How are you fixed for cartridges?" asked Whiz.

"I'm not. I unraveled all my ammunition soundin' signals."

"My belt is full, but they're thirty-eights."

"They're too small for my old Betsy. I need forty-fives. But nemmine that." Gulliver touched the handle of the machete in its scabbard at his side. "Put me in range o' the critters that got my jeep an' I'll do all that needs doin' with this here toad stabber."

Tom wore a hunting knife in a beaded sheath that he had made for himself, and the powerful binoculars that his father had given him were in the case that hung from his shoulder. The boy was fully aware of the seriousness of the situation. Without the jeep and its contents, he and his friends were in for a rugged time. They had no food, no blankets, no protection against the insects that swarmed in the forest dampness after sunset. They had but one firearm, and a limited supply of ammunition.

Though Whiz Walton, having been trained by a metropolitan police department, was a crack marksman, one gun could accomplish little if it came to a showdown fight with Indians. Moreover, a gun was no protection against the treacherous plotting of Koerner.

"We got to find that jeep," said Gulliver flatly. "Let's go lookin'."

Once more the big man led the way. Beyond the clearing, the trees were thinner than they had been. The tracks of the jeep continued in an almost straight line. Apparently no effort had been made to hide those tracks.

Presently the ground became more moist and the grass gave way to black loam.

"Hold it," Gulliver said. "Here's where we can see some footprints."

There were many of them, and the topmost ones were sharp and clearly defined.

"Barefoot," Gulliver observed.

"All of them?" asked Whiz.

Gulliver studied the ground before replying, then said, "I don't see anythin' but barefoot prints."

"Indians," murmured Tom. "Maybe the Aztecs we're looking for. Is there any sign of Koerner?"

Gulliver shook his head slowly. "Can't see none."

"A lot of men came through here."

"Ten—twelve—maybe more."

"That's just dandy." It was Whiz Walton who spoke.

"Even if we do catch up to the jeep, all we have to do is take it away from ten or twelve Indians!"

"I figure they was probably haulin' it on a rope or somethin'. Don't that seem likely, Tom?"

Tom nodded. "I guess so, but someone must have been steering it."

"Maybe that's why we don't find any prints o' Koerner's boots. He was likely ridin' an steerin'."

"Well, what'll we do, keep going?" Whiz asked.

"There's nothing else to do," said Tom.

Gulliver nodded. "Tom's right. They's nothin' else to do."

Seven o'clock found the grim-faced trio trudging through the woods between the wheel tracks of the jeep. Ordinarily, they would have been in camp, with Gulliver preparing the evening meal and bragging about his special recipes. There would have been good-natured banter between Whiz Walton and the big man, and there would have been discussions of the route that had been covered during the day.

The loss of the jeep had changed everything. Now, there was no reason to stop and make camp. There was nothing to stop for. There was no food to cook; no water to drink.

Tom Quest was hungry. He thought ruefully of the food that had been left over at the noonday meal, and wished he had eaten more. He tightened his belt and

told himself that hunger was an insignificant matter compared to the problems ahead. The sun would soon be gone, and the dampness would increase as twilight deepened. Bugs and insects would come out of hiding. The mosquito netting that would have given protection against their bites and stings was in the jeep.

The black, soft loam that had been underfoot was gone and there was knee-high grass. The trees were closer together and the underbrush had become more dense. Gulliver pointed to a place where a sapling had been felled to make room for the passage of the jeep.

"Note that," he said, pointing to the clean, sharp cut. "It looks like it'd been lopped down with a machete like mine."

"That's a pretty big tree to be cut down with a single blow," observed Tom.

"Might've used an axe," suggested Whiz.

Gulliver shook his head. "Machete," he insisted. "They's a difference in the cuts, an' I can tell. It was a machete, an' a doggoned sharp one."

"Handled by a man who's plenty strong," the reporter added grimly.

Whiz Walton and Gulliver were hunched down, studying the cut. Neither of them had noticed yet that a few yards ahead, the jeep tracks made a sharp turn to the right. Tom advanced so he might look around a dense growth of tropical foliage, but found that his view was blocked by a pile of massive boulders fifty feet away.

He followed the tracks to another turn that avoided the rock formation, this time to the left. The trees and underbrush in this part of the jungle were more dense than any Tom had seen. The path over which the jeep had been moved was like a corridor walled in on both sides by woody growth and leaves.

At the rocks Tom stopped and stared at the end of the jungle. Just ahead, beyond a narrow fringe of growth, he saw a vast expanse of open country. He hurried forward and parted the brushwood for a better view.

It was an arid stretch without the slightest sign of tree or bush or shrub for as far as the boy could see. But it was not this wasteland that held Tom Quest's attention. Off in the distance the land rose sharply to a plateau with sides that were almost perpendicular. There were buildings on the top, and in the distance they looked like toys. Bathed in the glow of a red sunset, the plateau was an awe-inspiring spectacle that for a moment left Tom speechless.

Then he saw the jeep tracks in a straight line toward the nearest wall.

"That's *it*," he whispered huskily. "That's the Lost Mesa!"

CHAPTER 13

The Coming of Itzacoatl

TIME SEEMED to stand still while Tom Quest stared in awe at the grandeur of the Mesa. Heat waves rising from the arid ground gave a shimmering quality to the golden hues that were reflected by the sunset.

Tom remembered much that he had learned about the history of the ancient Aztecs before the coming of Cortez and the conquerors of Mexico. His knowledge was based partly on facts brought out by archeological survey, and partly on legends. He remembered reading about the long marches and countermarches of the ancient people wandering about in search of a definite place where they might settle. There was a story of how they had finally reached a large city in the year 1216 and, being well received by the king, had stayed there and made homes,

believing that their journey had come to an end at last. They had called their city Mexicatls, and thus established the word from which Mexico was derived.

Soon after, however, they had been conquered, and those who did not escape were reduced to slavery. No records survived of the Aztecs who escaped the conquerors. Vague traces indicated that they had fled to the highlands in the southeastern part of the country.

Many archeologists, Tom knew, believed the fugitive Aztecs had taken refuge on an island. After studying the photographs of the Mesa, Hamilton Quest had said that the land surrounding the plateau quite likely had been under water at some time in the past. The Mesa might have been an island—the one to which the Aztecs had fled.

A low, exclamatory whistle sounded close to Tom Quest's shoulder. The boy turned quickly and found that Gulliver and Whiz Walton had joined him. They were staring wide-eyed at the Mesa.

"Holy mackerel!" the reporter exclaimed. "Am I seeing things?"

"Feast yo' eyes," put in big Gulliver. "Yo're lookin' at somethin' that blamed few men have ever seen."

"That's it," said Whiz. "That must be the Lost Mesa!"

" 'Tain't nothin' else!" Gulliver pointed to the sun-baked ground. The tracks of the jeep were faint but unmistakable, though the ground was too hard to show the footprints of the Indians.

"My jeep," Gulliver said, "she's been hauled right straight over yonder to that there chunk o' Mesa."

"How far away do you think it is?" asked Tom.

"It's hard to judge the distance, Tom. Offhand, I'd say it's somethin' over half a mile an' somethin' less than two miles."

"Whatever it is," Whiz Walton said, "it's mighty open country. We can't possibly cross to the Mesa without being seen. Maybe if we wait until after dark, we could make it, but not now."

Tom said, "Maybe the Aztecs will be friendly."

Gulliver grunted dubiously.

"They've had plenty of time to ambush us, or capture us if they wanted to," Tom pointed out. "They could have jumped us almost any time while we were making our way through the jungle."

"They stole my jeep," argued Gulliver. "I can't think o' nothin' that's more downright unfriendly. I figure it'll be better to wait an hour or so, then move up on that Mesa under cover o' dark. If we can locate the jeep before we're spotted, I can git some ammunition for my six gun an' bust out some hand grenades. I—"

The big man's speech was left suspended when a dry twig snapped close at hand. Tom Quest was the first to see the Aztecs. There were ten or twelve of them stepping from the underbrush in a semicircle.

Whiz Walton's hand dropped fast. His fingers closed around the handle of his pistol, but they were fro-

zen there when Gulliver's thick fingers clamped down.

"Hold it, Whiz," the big man ordered huskily. "Let the redskins make the first move."

The Indians had copper-colored skin, and hair that was black and coarse. As they talked to each other with guttural sounds, their teeth were revealed as short and regular in large mouths surrounded by thick, purple lips. Their noses were flat and their foreheads narrow. Their black eyes, studying the white man, registered curiosity.

During the first few seconds of surveillance, there was no gesture of either friendship or animosity.

Most of the Indians were of medium height, thickset and with well-proportioned limbs. It was their costume that fascinated Tom Quest. They were attired in robes that looked like cotton cloth brilliantly colored. They were adorned with plumes and feathers as well as flowers.

One of the men was taller than the others. He seemed to be the leader, and as a symbol of authority, carried a machete much like the one in the scabbard at Gulliver's side. Stepping forward, he looked first at Whiz, and then at Tom, studying each from head to toe and back again. Then he looked at Gulliver, who scowled darkly as he returned the steady gaze.

"In spite of their dress," Tom said softly, "they look just about the same as other Indians."

The observation struck a spark in Gulliver's mind. "The same as other Indians," the big man thought. For an instant, he had been somewhat at a loss as to how to

deal with members of a civilization whose instincts, practices and customs were those of a lost era. Then it suddenly occurred to him that the Indians in Texas and in Oklahoma were primitive people. He had been well schooled in dealing with the Cherokees and the Apaches. He decided to deal in the same way with the Aztecs.

He raised his right hand to shoulder level, gave a guttural grunt, then pointed to his chest and said, "Me Gulliver."

The Aztec leader responded by raising his machete high overhead in a sort of salute. Then he lowered the blade and laid the flat side across his chest. He said, "Me Itzacoatl."

"Itzacoatl!" Whiz Walton's repetition of the name was involuntary. Then he went on. "Hey, Gulliver, this is the Aztec we heard about. He's the one—"

The reporter's speech ended with a grunt as Gulliver jabbed an elbow into his side and growled, "Shut up."

If Itzacoatl was impressed by Gulliver's great size, he didn't show it. He met the big man's scowl with an impassive face, then stepped quickly to one side and pointed to a sapling whose diameter was about three inches. His companions clucked in what appeared to be expressions of delight when Itzacoatl held the keen edge of his machete against the tree trunk.

"Wonder what this is goin' to be," muttered Gulliver.

He soon found out. Itzacoatl drew back his knife, then brought it down in a wide, hissing sweep. It cut through

the tree in a single sharp blow, leaving a stump about three feet in height.

"Gosh!" gasped Tom. "He can sure handle that machete!"

"Showin' off," rumbled Gulliver. "That's all he's doin'."

"It looks," observed Whiz Walton, "as if it's your turn, Gulliver."

Itzacoatl was holding out the knife with the handle extended toward Gulliver.

"You do," he said.

Gulliver eyed the blade and then the stump of the tree that had been felled. Tapping himself on the chest, he asked, "Yo' want me to lop off a tree like yo' done?"

Itzacoatl repeated his command. "You do."

Gulliver gripped the handle of the blade and tested the keen edge with his thumb. "Aplenty sharp," he muttered.

Tom said, "You'll have to cut through that stump in a single blow or lose face."

"I don't aim to lose face," replied the big man gruffly. "Fact is," he continued, "I aim to show these critters some strong medicine." He turned to Whiz. "Let me have yo' six gun."

"For what?" demanded the reporter.

"Let me take it. Yo'll find out. I'd use my own, only I'm plumb out o' ammunition."

The reporter shrugged his shoulders and handed over his revolver.

Gulliver gripped the weapon in his left hand and Itzacoatl's broad blade in his right.

"Now," he said, moving toward the three-foot stump, "give me elbow room."

He took his stance, feet wide apart, and lifted the machete overhead. Every ounce of his tremendous strength went into the single sweeping cut. The machete went through the stump, lopping off a one-foot length, and then at the finish of the swing, Gulliver released his grip on the handle. The blade shot up into the air for thirty feet or more. Whiz Walton's gun barked twice and the blade seemed to become a living, dancing thing in mid-air. It jerked and jumped with the impact of high-powered, steel-jacketed bullets.

There were yips of fear and dismay from the Indians, and they drew back from the blade when it fell to the ground.

Gulliver picked up the machete, which had been nicked in two places, and offered it to Itzacoatl.

"Yo' wanted to see my medicine," he said. "Well, there's a sample of it."

The Indian stared wide-eyed, and fell back a pace without accepting his machete.

"I sort o' dented 'er up some," Gulliver went on, not caring whether or not he was understood. "But I'll tell yo' what I'll do. I'll swap with yo'." He drew his own blade from its scabbard and offered it handle first to Itzacoatl. "Yo' take this one," he said.

The Indian looked pleased as he came forward to accept the gift, then he clucked a command to the other Indians, and the group withdrew a few yards to go into a huddled conference.

"I don't know how we made out," Gulliver explained to Tom and Whiz. "Looks like the votin' is takin' place right now."

"That show was very smart," Whiz Walton said sarcastically. "A few minutes ago, we had two weapons—my gun and your machete. You've given away the machete."

"Just swapped 'er," Gulliver corrected.

Whiz snorted as he looked at the damaged blade in Gulliver's hand. "A heck of a lot of good that one is," he said, "after being kissed by a couple of slugs."

"I admit it was a gamble, Whiz, but we had to do somethin'. That Itzacoatl critter wanted to see strong medicine. If I'd only had my jeep an' the stuff that's in 'er, I could o' put on a first-rate show an' had them redskins kowtowin' aplenty. I didn't have much to work with."

Tom had been watching the Indians out of the corner of his eye. "You impressed them, all right," he said. "They keep pointing to you."

"As far as I can see," put in Whiz Walton, "it's a tossup whether they'll kowtow to us or exterminate us."

The Indians reached the end of their discussion and

rose to their feet. Their expressions as they looked at the white men were not reassuring.

At a word from Itzacoatl, each of the copper-skinned men unwound from his hips a length of cotton cord.

Itzacoatl held out his hands close together and said, "You do."

"They aim to tie our hands together," Gulliver interpreted.

"Not me," said Whiz Walton. "We haven't much of a chance, but I'm for fighting."

"Don't do it," barked Gulliver. "Let 'em tie us an' take us prisoners. When the time comes for fightin', I'll let yo' know."

Grumbling disapproval, the reporter permitted himself to be tied about the wrists while Tom and Gulliver were similarly treated.

Itzacoatl inspected the knots and nodded approval, then he pointed to the Mesa. "Go there," he said. "See Mixtli."

Tom felt a thrill of excitement when he heard the name. Mixtli, he remembered, was the high priestess of the Lost Mesa. The ancient woman who held the power of life and death over all her subjects. Mixtli would pass judgment on the prisoners. Would her judgment be dictated by Koerner?

CHAPTER 14

The Inner Chamber

THE TRIP across the arid expanse of level country between the jungle and the base of the Mesa was farther than Gulliver had anticipated. The distance exceeded his outside estimate of two miles by at least twenty-five per cent.

Itzacoatl led the way with Tom Quest at his side. The Indian kept a firm grip on the cotton cord that dangled from Tom's bound wrists. The other Indians, with Whiz and Gulliver as captives, trailed behind.

There was nothing in the manner or the gestures of the captors to indicate ill will. In fact, Tom found Itzacoatl inclined to be friendly. The Aztec leader knew a smattering of English, and by exercising patience Tom was able to converse with him.

He learned that the jeep (to which Itzacoatl referred

as "the boat that goes on land") had been taken "prisoner" much as the white men had been. It had been towed at the end of a stout cotton rope by Itzacoatl and his companions to the Mesa, where it had been left while the Indians returned to make a further investigation in the jungle.

Tom learned that these were days of feasting, dancing and religious ceremonials. The costumes of the men were festive ones worn to celebrate the arrival of the man with the white skin.

For hundreds of years the lost civilization on the Mesa had been awaiting this man. His coming had been prophesied by the Aztec gods. Generation after generation had looked forward to the fulfillment of the prophecy and the coming of the one who would lead the Aztecs to the position of power and influence they had occupied before the Conquest.

Tom was not surprised when Itzacoatl described the fugitive from justice named Koerner as the long-awaited leader.

At the base of the Mesa, the tracks of the jeep turned sharply to the right, where a ramplike path about six feet in width sloped upward. It was a long, gradual slope that extended the full length of the perpendicular wall and spiraled around one end to continue on the opposite side.

Twilight had deepened, but there remained enough light for Tom and his companions to see the market place, the roads and buildings on the tableland. They

were guided through a street that was filled with people. Both men and women were attired in brightly colored cotton clothes brilliantly decorated with jewelry and feathers. The women wore garlands of flowers around their necks and mantles about their shoulders. Just ahead, a number of persons sang and danced in circles.

The music came from drums, flutes, conch shells, whistles, and rattles made of clay and gourds.

Itzacoatl led the prisoners past group after group of awe-stricken dancers in the patio of the largest building. It was an impressive structure made of stone. To one side stood a great stairway leading to the sacrificial platform.

Tom was hungry and thirsty, and tired to the point of exhaustion. He felt weak, and the unreality, the flickering torches, the strange, unearthly music, made him slightly giddy. He found it increasingly hard to talk to Itzacoatl. His throat was sore and his tongue was thick. He stumbled at the entrance to the temple and would have fallen if his Indian captor had not reached out quickly and caught him.

Inside the temple, it was silent when a massive door of redwood closed. The barefoot Indians made no sound on the flagstone floor, but Tom's boot heels and those of Whiz and Gulliver clicked sharply in the great, empty anteroom.

They passed several flagstone altars on which were crude lamps made by placing a wick of cotton in a pot-

tery bowl of oil. The yellow light was flickering and uncertain. On the altars, there were sticks of sugar cane and plates piled high with corn cakes made in the images of the Aztec gods. And there were pitchers filled with a colorless liquid that gave off a pungent aroma. Crude pictures had been painted on the stone walls in nightmarish colors. Some of the pictures represented grotesque, dancing figures, but mostly they were of animals and reptiles with the crocodile most often featured.

After what seemed an endless walk through the gloomy dampness of the vast, high-ceilinged room, Itzacoatl paused before a heavy door set in twelve-inch beams of hardwood. He jerked once on a cord that hung suspended from somewhere overhead. The door swung out just far enough to permit him to enter, then closed.

The guards watched closely, but made no objection when Tom moved a few yards to stand near Whiz and Gulliver.

"Did either of you learn anything?" Tom spoke eagerly despite his fatigue.

"No," replied the columnist shortly, "but I think you did."

"I heard yo' an' that Injun leader chewin' an' jawin' at a great rate," said Gulliver. "Yo' an' Itzacoatl was makin' plenty o' words, but I was too far back to savvy them."

"He speaks a little English."

"I figured that same. What'd he tell yo'?"

"Koerner is here on the Mesa. He just about runs the place."

"Doggone," grumbled Gulliver. "Runs it, yo' say?"

Tom nodded.

Whiz Walton spoke in a low voice. "I still have the six gun. They haven't taken it away from me. If I have to, I'll use it on that cadaverous fiend!"

"Don't yo' do nothin' foolish," warned Gulliver.

"There's nothing foolish about getting the drop on a skunk like Koerner."

"But there is," Tom said. "The Indians think he's the long-awaited leader who will show them how to rise to the power and glory they had before the Conquest. They think he's going to lead them to the control of all Mexico."

"Jugheads," growled Gulliver. "How could they be buckle-brained enough to let a triple-twisted skunk like Koerner sell 'em such a bill o' goods?"

"Remember the legends Dad told us? He said that the Aztecs had been waiting for centuries for the man with the white skin to come. Mixtli must think Koerner is the man."

"Ojo mentioned Mixtli," said Whiz.

"Yes. And Itzacoatl told me more about her. She's the high priestess, all right. She's the queen and her word is the law. This is her temple, and I think we're going to be taken before her."

The door ahead was moving inward. It opened to let Itzacoatl step forth, but not far enough to give a view of the chamber beyond.

The Aztec moved directly to Whiz Walton and touched the cords on the newshound's wrists with the tip of his machete.

"Me cut," he said gutturally as Whiz drew back. Quickly and deftly, Itzacoatl moved the blade to cut through the cotton strands.

"You free."

"Thanks," returned the other dryly as he rubbed his chafed wrists to restore the circulation. "Now what?"

Itzacoatl pointed to the door. "Go there."

"Okay. But what about the others?"

"Oth-thers?" repeated the Indian uncomprehendingly.

"I mean these two." Whiz pointed to Tom and Gulliver. "They are still tied like prisoners. You cut them free too?"

Itzacoatl nodded slowly. "Cut free, after," he said. Then, placing the point of the blade at the reporter's back to emphasize his command, he added, "You go."

Whiz shrugged his shoulders. "I guess that's how it's going to be," he said to his friends. "I'm elected to make the first plunge."

He brushed past Itzacoatl and through the door, which the Indian closed slowly.

Gulliver was frowning heavily. "I don't like this at all," he grumbled.

"What do you make of it?" asked Tom in a low voice. "Why do you suppose they picked Whiz as the first one to meet Queen Mixtli?"

"I can only figure one thing, Tom, an' that is somethin' I don't like."

"What's that?"

"Whiz Walton's wearin' the shootin' iron. Maybe they want to git that hardware out o' the way first off. Maybe the medicine I made with it on Itzacoatl's blade was too darn strong to suit these redskins."

"But, Gulliver, they could have taken the gun away anytime—"

Tom's speech was cut off by the muffled report of a pistol beyond the heavy door. The sound was followed by dead silence.

Gulliver's voice was low and husky. "Now what do yo' make o' that?"

"I—I don't know."

"Whiz made promises."

"Y-yes. He said he was ready to let Koerner have it."

"I'm hopin' that Whiz didn't make no such fool move. Maybe he was only showin' off strong medicine, like I done when I fired at Itzacoatl's machete."

Tom looked at the faces of the Indian guards, but there was nothing to be learned from that source. They were utterly expressionless.

As the door moved, Itzacoatl sprang forward and stuck his head through the narrow opening. There were whis-

pered words, too low to catch, and then the Aztec turned toward Tom.

"You next," he said, touching his blade to the ropes on the boy's wrists.

"Oh no, yo' don't!" cut in Gulliver as he stepped up and elbowed the boy aside. "Here!" He stuck out his thick wrists. "Yo' operate on this here rope an' let me be the one to go next."

Itzacoatl raised his machete and placed the sharp end against the big man's throat. No words were needed. A slight pressure of the pointed blade gave Gulliver the choice of stepping back or getting pierced in the Adam's apple. He stepped back and Itzacoatl smiled.

When his wrists were free, Tom glanced at Gulliver and grinned gamely. "I guess you'll have to stew in your curiosity a little longer, Gulliver," he said. "I'll find out what's beyond the door before you do."

Gulliver's face was a picture of helplessness and purple with rage.

"Take it easy," Tom warned. "Don't blow your top. Nothing you can do will help, and whatever you do might make things worse."

There was a slight prod by Itzacoatl.

Tom stepped forward, and squeezed through the narrow opening.

The door was closed behind his back.

The room was square, approximately forty feet in each dimension, and well lighted by many oil lamps and can-

dles. It was hot and stifling and filled with a cloying sweet scent that came from incense burning in countless braziers supported by stone pedestals. The walls were hung with rich tapestries, and gold and silver seemed to be everywhere.

There were at least a score of Indians on guard. Their clothing, like that of the others Tom had seen, was gaudy with jewels, feathers and bright ribbons.

But of all of these things Tom Quest had only a vague impression. His wide-eyed stare was focused on the altar straight ahead and the steps that led up to it. Whiz Walton lay face upward on the steps. His eyes were closed, and the carpet was stained red beneath his head.

A man stood on the topmost step, his back against the altar. He was exceedingly tall and thin. He was hairless, and pasty-white skin seemed to be drawn tightly over his large head and prominent cheekbones. His lipless mouth was opened in a mirthless smile, exposing teeth that were long and yellow. The creature looked like something more dead than alive. Tom recognized the man as Koerner.

CHAPTER 15

The High Priestess Intervenes

KOERNER's nasal voice cut through the silence.

"So," he began triumphantly, "we meet again. I am delighted to see you, Tom Quest. Yes, indeed, I am delighted to see you."

Tom had been weak. He had felt lightheaded on entering the room, but the sight of Whiz Walton lying on the steps and Koerner's gloating manner sent the hot blood of anger rushing to his brain. He felt new strength and his voice was shrill with indignation.

"What have you done to Walton?" he demanded. He started across the room toward his fallen friend, but stopped abruptly when several guards stepped forward with extended knives.

"Be calm, young man," chuckled Koerner. "Violence will get you nowhere, as you can see by looking at the man who lies at my feet."

"What have you done to him?" repeated Tom.

"He made the mistake of drawing a gun. It was a grave mistake, but not a fatal one. It was his second mistake that was fatal."

"Fatal?" Tom Quest echoed thinly.

Koerner smirked and nodded. "I trust you will not make the same mistake."

Tom's steady eyes met the deep-set ones of Koerner.

"As you are probably aware, I have extensive plans in Mexico. I have spent years developing a certain—project. You and your friends stumbled on the approximate location of this place. Your knowledge is shared by your father and the man named Gonzales."

"What about it?" asked Tom.

"I tried to discourage you before you actually found the Mesa. I left a slightly misleading map in a certain clearing."

"Then it *was* you who left that map."

Koerner smiled, nodding. "It is impossible to reach this place without passing through that clearing. If you had not found the clearing, I would not have been concerned with you. When you found it, I tried to turn you to the side."

"And trap us in a pitfall!" Tom added stoutly.

"The pitfall just happened to be there. The Aztecs had

made it in the hope of trapping game. No, I did not intend that you and your friends should perish in any pitfall.

"Whether you lived or died was of no concern to me as long as you did not find the Mesa. But you were stubborn. I hoped that the loss of your car and its contents might discourage you. You refused to be turned back and now you are here.

"Obviously, I cannot let you go. Furthermore, I cannot risk the chance that your father may send others in search of you."

Koerner half turned and took a sheet of paper from a near-by table. "I have written a letter," he went on smoothly, "addressed to your father in Oaxaca. It requests him to come at once and bring Señor Gonzales with him. A map will be enclosed to make his trip less difficult. I asked your friend Whiz Walton to sign this letter. He refused. That was his *fatal* mistake."

The thin man extended the letter and said, "You may read it before you sign it."

"Do you expect me to sign such a letter?" Tom demanded heatedly.

"It is the simplest way to be sure that all who know about this Mesa are here where I can watch them."

"I won't sign it!"

Koerner shrugged his narrow shoulders. "No matter," he said, "no matter. I think your big friend Gulliver will

sign it rather than see you—let us say, in painful circumstances."

There was a single sharp, high-pitched cry from one side of the room, and a tiny woman of great age rushed past the guards. Her snow-white hair was gathered in a tight knot at the back of her head, and her coppery-skinned face was distorted with rage.

The guards fell back before her fury and even Koerner was impressed. He crumpled the letter and stuffed it into the pocket of his coat as he stepped back. The newcomer, Tom felt certain, must be old Mixtli herself.

The little woman was a dynamo of energy. She dropped to her knees beside Whiz Walton and issued guttural commands which the Indians hurried to obey.

One brought water in a pottery bowl and another held a lighted candle close. Talking all the while, old Mixtli grabbed the garment of the nearest guard and ripped off a six-inch strip. She doused it in the water, then bathed a wound on the back of Whiz Walton's head.

"Let me help," said Tom, coming close to crouch beside his friend. "I—I thought he was killed."

"And so did I."

It wasn't till afterward that Tom realized that he had not been in the least surprised when Mixtli spoke in English, and surprisingly good English at that.

"I think," she went on, "your friend is only stunned. You can see for yourself that the wound is not serious."

She parted the hair to expose a half-inch cut which, while it bled profusely, probably was superficial.

Dipping the cloth in water again, she bathed the face of the unconscious man and presently the eyelids fluttered. Whiz moaned softly, then in a low voice murmured, "Holy mackerel, what hit me?"

"His name?" Mixtli asked sharply.

Tom said, "Whiz Walton."

"That is what I thought. And you are Tom Quest?"

Tom nodded.

"There is a third man in your party."

"His name is Gulliver. He's outside with Itzacoatl."

Mixtli turned to Koerner. "What happened to this man?" she demanded in English.

"Your majesty, he drew a gun. He would have shot me, but one of your guards hit him with a club and saved my life. As a matter of fact, he did fire one shot just as he was struck. Fortunately, he missed me."

Tom realized that Koerner had lied in saying that Whiz had been killed for his refusal to sign the letter to Tom's father. He had used the incident in the hope of frightening Tom into signing the letter without delay. Tom looked at Mixtli. The little old woman had the most fascinating eyes Tom Quest had ever seen. They were uncommonly bright despite her apparent great age, and violet in color. They seemed to hold the wisdom of the ages, and yet there was shrewdness in them as she looked at Koerner.

"Later," she said, "I will question the guards. For your sake, Koerner, I hope you tell the truth."

Koerner bowed from the hips and said, "I have told the truth."

"You have tried to persuade me that these three are evil; you have tried to have them condemned to death."

"As your new leader," began the white man, "I have tried to advise you that these men are dangerous. They are evil. They come to plot against you and your people."

"If that is true, the gods will know and punish them."

"Of course," replied Koerner with another bow. "Your great gods will know. It is they who will inflict the penalty of death."

"Without your help," added Mixtli significantly. "Now go, while I receive them as my guests."

Koerner turned on his heel and left the room by a small door at the rear.

Whiz Walton by this time was sitting up and holding his throbbing head between his hands. He looked at Tom and blinked and said, "What in the Sam Hill is this?"

"I think," replied Tom softly, "it's better than we hoped."

"Who's the old girl?" Whiz's voice was barely a whisper, and Mixtli had moved to an altar fully twenty feet away. Yet she heard him distinctly.

Turning, she said, "The 'old girl' is named Mixtli."

"D-did you hear me?" faltered Whiz.

"I miss little that is said or done. I am Mixtli, direct

descendant of the god of war." She brought them a jug of brightly painted pottery and offered it to Whiz.

"A drink of water, and perhaps you will feel better."

Whiz drank deeply and passed the jug to Tom while the priestess apologized for her absence when the prisoners had been brought into the temple.

"Our friend," Tom said, "is thirsty. He is still outside."

"He, too, shall be given water, and then all of you must eat and drink and take part in our ceremonial."

"Just one thing," broke in Whiz Walton. "I'd like to get this straight."

Mixtli lifted her white eyebrows questioningly.

"Just what is our position? We've been brought here as prisoners. Are we friends or enemies? Where do we stand?"

"The one named Koerner calls you evil."

"Yeah, I know that. And we could tell you a few things about him, but you wouldn't believe them. We know where we stand with Koerner. He'd bump us—I mean he'd kill us if he had the chance."

"It is," said Mixtli, "the gods who will decide. You will not be allowed to leave my kingdom, but you will be treated as guests. If you are evil, the gods will soon dispose of you. Have you further questions?"

"How did you learn to speak English so well?"

Mixtli smiled. "Wisdom," she said, "comes with age. I have books—many of them. The tongue of the white man I speak, and also the tongue of the Spanish con-

queror. But now I must see your friend who is said to make strong medicine."

Mixtli clucked a command and one of the Indians opened the door.

Whiz looked at Tom and said, "Gulliver is due for a surprise when he sees Mixtli!" Then more soberly he added, "I'll bet all the tea in China Koerner will find a way to influence these Aztec gods against us!"

CHAPTER 16

The Sacrificial Feast

WHEN GULLIVER came through the door, his heavy chin was jutting and his hands, made into fists, were cocked and ready to swing as soon as they found a target. His scowl softened a bit and some of the tension went out of his face when he saw Tom wearing a reassuring grin. But then he saw Whiz Walton. The columnist was badly dishevelled. His hair was in disorder and wet with the water that had been used to bathe his wound. There were stains of blood on his clothing and his face was drawn with pain. He touched the top of his head gingerly with a bloodstained handkerchief.

"What happened to yo', Whiz?" Gulliver demanded thunderously.

The reporter looked at his handkerchief. "Bleeding has stopped," he muttered. Then, looking at Gulliver,

"I got a rap on the head. But I guess I asked for it. I went for my gun when I saw Koerner."

"Koerner!" Gulliver repeated the name explosively. "Where's he at?"

"He's not here right now," Tom said. "Take it easy, Gulliver. Relax and have a drink of water."

Gulliver took the jug from Tom and tipped it to his mouth. The muscles of his throat moved up and down as he swallowed audibly with prodigious gulps. He emptied the vessel, tossed it aside and made a wry face as he wiped his lips on the sleeve of his jacket.

"Warm," he complained, "an' brackish. It's pulin' water."

"At least," Tom said, "it's wet."

Gulliver sniffed the air that was thick with burning incense and wrinkled his nose disgustedly.

"Don't mind the incense," Tom told him. "You'll get used to it in a few minutes, then you won't notice it at all. I think we're going to get fairly decent treatment here. Mixtli has promised food and a place to sleep."

"Who?"

"Mixtli. She's the high priestess. She runs things on this mesa."

The little old woman with the violet eyes stepped forward and rested her thin hand on Gulliver's forearm. "I," she said, "am Mixtli. Descendant of the God of War."

Gulliver looked down at Mixtli's wrinkled face, then into the unusual eyes that were so bright and clear.

No one could guess the age of Mixtli. She was less than five feet tall and couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. She was very old but despite her years, her powers of perception were exceptionally keen. At one time, she must have been a woman of rare beauty. Even now, her nose was small and straight, and her lips thin and well shaped.

Tom was amazed at the change that had come over Mixtli. When she had first entered the room and found Whiz Walton unconscious, her rage had been a terrible thing to witness. Savage fury had been in her face, and her voice had sounded like the shrill cry of a jungle beast. But now she seemed almost maternal as she looked fearlessly into Gulliver's questioning eyes while her hand remained at rest on the big man's arm.

She smiled and said, "You Gulliver?"

Gulliver's face was relaxed and filled with wonderment. He nodded slowly without speaking.

Mixtli patted his muscled arm. "Big fella," she said. "Itzacoatl spoke about you. You make strong medicine."

Gulliver grinned at the priestess. "Well!" he exclaimed. "So yo're Mixtli." He stuck out his hairy paw. "I'm downright glad to make yo' acquaintance. By thunder, yo' ain't no bigger'n a peanut, an' yo're cute enough to serve up on a hunk o' toast."

He screwed up the left side of his face in a bold wink and was delighted when Mixtli winked in response. "Dad-rat it," he went on, "yo're all right! Yo' better be

careful, ma'am, or I'll just hang yo' on my watch chain an' wear yo' for an ornament."

If Mixtli was confused by the enthusiastic outburst, she gave no sign. Her smile remained unchanged but into her eyes there came a look of tolerant amusement. She gave Gulliver's arm a final pat, then turned and issued orders to Itzacoatl, who had been standing by in stoic silence since entering the room with Gulliver.

Itzacoatl relayed the commands to other Indians who proceeded to lay out a sumptuous meal. A brightly colored mat of woven cotton was placed on the floor in the center of the room. On this was spread a wide variety of tasty foods both hot and cold which were brought from other rooms of the temple. Some of the foods resembled Mexican dishes with which Tom was familiar, but many were new to the boy and his companions.

There was a variety of fruit and both cooked and uncooked vegetables. There were small fish that resembled lake trout that had been fried in some sort of a cornmeal batter. There was pork and lamb and a huge plate piled high with cakes and cookies fashioned in the shapes of various gods and goddesses who were worshipped by the ancient Aztecs.

Mixtli turned and moved with graceful dignity up the flight of steps at the far end of the room. She seated herself on a mat in front of the altar and watched the Indians who were assembling the meal with silent efficiency.

Gulliver drew Tom Quest and Whiz Walton to one side, saying, "I aim to find out what this here is all about. Yo', Tom, maybe yo' can shed some light on these doin's. Is that little half-pint shemale really the boss o' this shebang?"

"She seems to be. When I came into the room, Koerner was in charge. He stood up there in front of the altar where Mixtli is sitting. Whiz was lying on the stairs. He was out cold. I thought he was dead."

Tom told how Koerner had tried to pressure him into signing a letter to his father and how Mixtli had entered the room with cyclonic fury.

"Koerner," he said, "didn't give her any argument. In fact, he was as meek as a lamb. He didn't say anything to Mixtli about the letter to Dad."

"What did he do with that letter?"

"Stuck it into his pocket."

"Then what?"

"He did a fast fade-out. He left through that door over there." Tom pointed to a small door at one side of the altar.

"I wonder," Gulliver muttered, rasping his fingernail across the stubble of beard on his chin, "where that door goes to."

Mixtli answered the question. "His private living quarters," she said.

The three white men turned in surprise. The conversation had been carried on in whispers that normally

would be inaudible a few feet away. It was twenty-five or thirty feet from where they stood to the dais. The priestess smiled.

"How in tarnation could yo' hear us?" demanded Gulliver.

"My hearing," replied Mixtli, "is good. Later," she continued, "I shall ask the man with the white skin about the letter he put into his pocket."

Whiz Walton spoke in a dry voice. "We'd have more privacy," he observed, "if we were sitting in a department store window."

"Pay no attention to me," said Mixtli. "Forget that I am here."

"I got a better idea than that," said Gulliver, hitching up his trousers. "I aim to git some information an' I know where to git it. Yo', Tom, an' yo', Whiz, follow me."

The big man crossed the room and took the flight of stairs in one great stride. He sat down next to Mixtli and said, "Now, ma'am, yo' give out some true facts. Why did yo' have us brought here? An' what do yo' aim to do with us? What's more, I want to know about my jeep."

"Jeep?"

Gulliver nodded. "Itzacoatl an' the rest o' those Injuns who was with him, towed 'er away. We followed the tracks right here to this mesa. That there jeep is my personal an' private property, an' she's filled with gear an' stuff that we need."

As Gulliver spoke, a look of comprehension came into Mixtli's face. "Jeep," she said again. "You mean boat-that-moves-on-land?"

"I reckon yo' could call 'er that," nodded Gulliver. "Where's it at?"

"Tomorrow," replied the old woman, "you see." And then she added an emphatic "Maybe."

"What do yo' mean 'maybe'?"

"First," said Mixtli, "I must talk to the man with the white skin for whose coming my people have waited through these countless generations."

"Now see here, Mixtli," Gulliver began in an antagonistic tone. "If yo' think that there critter Koerner is—"

Tom thought his big friend might offend the priestess. "Just a minute, Gulliver," he interrupted. "Let me talk to her."

Gulliver grumbled, "Go ahead, but make 'er understand that I want my jeep an' all that's in it!"

Tom said, "Mixtli, we know many things about you and your people. You have been waiting a long time for the coming of a man with white skin who would lead you to the power and glory of your ancestors."

Mixtli nodded. "That man," she said, "is here."

Tom shook his head. "You have been decieved. The man who came here is a bad man. His name is Koerner and he is a dangerous criminal."

"He knows many things," said Mixtli. "He has great and powerful magic. He brings music and voices from a small black box."

"A radio," grumbled Gulliver. "I could do the same thing if I had my jeep."

Mixtli ignored the interruption. "He tells of things that are to happen in the future," she continued.

"Bunk!" Then Gulliver grunted as Whiz Walton jabbed him with an elbow and said, "Shut up. Let Tom handle this."

"Two days ago," said Mixtli, "he told me you might be here. He described each one of you and also the boat-that-moves-on-land." She paused, then said, "He told me you were bad."

"I?" said Tom.

"Yes, and both of your companions. He said you would come here as enemies with strong magic to destroy me and my people."

"That's not true!" replied Tom emphatically. "We come here as friends. Koerner—the man with the white skin—is the man who is your enemy."

"We can prove we're friends," broke in Gulliver. "I got no end o' presents in my jeep. I got rings for yo' fingers, an' bells an' all manner o' doo-dads. I can fix yo' up like a Christmas tree as soon as I git my jeep."

"Strong magic," murmured Mixtli.

"Yo' can say that again!"

Tom said, "If you think we're enemies, why are you treating us like guests?"

"It is the time for celebration. It is Xochilhuitl—the fiesta of the flowers. We give honor to our gods with music and dancing and offerings of food. And on the

fourth day of the fiesta, we choose one who is a captive of war. He is offered in sacrifice to the god Texcatlipoca."

Tom had read about the annual fiesta of the ancient Aztecs. He remembered that the god Texcatlipoca was the Aztec Jupiter, to whom a youth was sacrificed.

Tom looked at the feast that had been spread out on the floor. *On the day before his death, the chosen youth was feasted.* Tom turned back to Mixtli, who seemed to have read his innermost thoughts.

"Tomorrow," she said impersonally, "we shall offer the chosen youth as a sacrifice. It is many years since my people have had prisoners of war. It is many years since we have had a captive youth to offer to our god Texcatlipoca."

"Holy mackerel!" Whiz Walton exclaimed. "Let me get this straight. Do you mean to say that one of us is going to be sacrificed to your god?"

Mixtli said, "Tomorrow. The feast tonight is in his honor. It is nearly ready."

The reporter sighed. "I—" he faltered. "I guess I'm not hungry."

Tom said, "You—you consider us captives. You think we are enemies. That's not true. We're friends. Your god Texcatlipoca would be very angry if you offered a friend as a sacrifice."

"Yo're doggoned right!" put in Gulliver, picking up the line of thought. "Yo' can't afford to make no such mistake! Why, dad-rat it, yo' offer one of us as a sacri-

fice, an' yo'll make ole Tex so mad he'll arch his back like a mule in a hailstorm. Yo'll rile him into a sod-pawin', horn-tossin' mood. An' when he gits his bristles up, he'll give yo' such a frothy spell o' muddy luck, yo'll wish yo'd never seen that Koerner critter."

Gulliver emphasized his colorful, explosive utterances by waving his arms and smacking his fist against his palm. In trying to persuade the priestess that human sacrifice would be a grave mistake, his enthusiasm was something to behold—and something to hear.

"I know yo' god Tex," he went on. "Why, thunderation, he's named after the place where I live, an' I'm tellin' yo' straight, he can be as touchy as a teased snake. As for Koerner, that polecat needs poppin' between the horns. He's so crooked, he could swallow nails an' spit out corkscrews. An' he's doin' yo' no good!

"Yo' put him an' me together an' lock the door. Then yo' just sit back an' wait. Ole Tex what's-his-name will pick the man yo' want to sacrifice, an' it'll all be took care of sudden without no fiddle-faddlin' feasts an' dances. Either him or me will walk out o' that there room, an' the critter that remains can be tucked into a posthole an' tamped down!"

Gulliver stopped from sheer lack of breath.

Mixtli shook her head. "I," she murmured, "do not know what you say."

Gulliver looked helpless. "Tom," he said in an injured tone, "she don't savvy English as much as we thought."

The old woman summarized the situation very briefly. "Tonight you feast, and then you sleep here in my temple, guarded by the priests. Tomorrow, one of you will be taken to the shore of the eternal lake and left there. If what you say is true—if you are friends, you need have no fear. Texcatlipoca will take the life of no one but an enemy."

CHAPTER 17

The Sacred Cylinder

A SILENT INDIAN stood motionless at the bottom step waiting patiently for Mixtli to give him her attention. Like the others, he wore the fiesta finery of the ancient Aztecs. His cotton clothing was brightly colored and decorated with flowers and feathers, and ornaments of gold and silver.

When Mixtli looked at him, he bowed from the hips to indicate that the feast was ready. As he bent, a metallic cylinder about the size of a man's thumb dropped from the folds of his garments and swung outward on a chain about his neck.

Tom Quest saw it. It was just another gewgaw, one of many trappings worn as ornaments by the Indians of the Mesa.

Mixtli saw the metal cylinder and exploded violently. She uttered a weird cry and leaped to her feet with the agility of a cat. She was down the stairs and reaching with an outstretched hand.

She snatched the cylinder and jerked it, breaking the chain. She held it in her clenched fist and screamed in rage as she shook it close to the face of the astonished Indian.

Gentleness had fallen from her like a cloak. She was once again the wild creature who had stormed into the room an hour ago. At that time her vitriolic passion had cowered Koerner. It had an equally devastating effect on the Indian.

He stepped back falteringly, his face drawn in fear. His eyes were wide and staring as he looked about the room in indecision. And then he turned to flee. He took just three short steps before the other Indians closed in. Two men seized him by the arms and Itzacoatl slapped him across the face with the broad side of his machete. The Indian cried out in pain and fear as he was seized roughly and brought back to face the frenzied priestess.

Tom Quest had studied the language of the Aztecs, and so had Gulliver and Whiz, but none of them could follow Mixtli. She talked too rapidly and used many words with which the white men were unfamiliar. When her outburst of passion subsided, she drew back to the topmost step and stood there silently for several minutes.

Then she spoke in a voice that was low and husky,

pronouncing each word ponderously. Tom could understand that speech. He didn't know all of the Aztec words, but it was not hard to fill in the gaps.

Mixtli held up the metal cylinder so everyone could see it clearly. She announced that it was sacred; that it had been stolen from the temple treasure chest, and that the penalty for even touching such an article was death.

Low moans of sympathy for the unfortunate Aztec came from a number of the Indians. Itzacoatl stepped to the condemned man's side. He began a plea for mercy, but was cut off sharply by a wave of Mixtli's hand.

"Itzacoatl," she said, speaking in Aztec, "it is not for you to defend Actl. You are a high priest in my temple."

"Actl is a priest," replied Itzacoatl simply.

"He is a priest no longer. He is a man condemned to die for stealing from the temple treasure and for angering the gods who sent to us the man whose skin is white."

Actl broke in. "I did not steal it," he sobbed. "Believe me, Priestess, I did not steal it! I saw it shining in the noonday sun. It was on the ground alone and unwanted where the rains might make it wet and the wind might cover it with dirt and where anyone who passed might crush it with a single step. I found it and I did not know it was a treasure. I took it to my home and there I made holes in it so I might wear it on a chain about my neck."

"Lies!" spat Mixtli. "You add to your sin by speaking with the forked tongue of the serpent."

"But, Priestess—"

"No more!" Mixtli waved one hand majestically and Actl was led sobbing through a small door at one side of the room.

Mixtli turned to face a grotesque statue that rested in the center of the great stone altar. The statue seemed to be made of white clay. It was about two feet in height and was a crude representation of a crocodile whose back was arched. The ugly snout and scaly tail were raised almost perpendicularly to form a U. It was a loathsome-looking object with eyes that somehow held an expression of evil.

As Mixtli closed her eyes and whispered, Tom edged closer to the altar. The cylinder that was treated like a priceless treasure was, after all, quite commonplace. Tom had seen a number of such cylinders—the last one in Oaxaca. It was the same as the cylinder that Ojo had carried in his pocket to hold the deadly Black Widow spiders. It was nothing more nor less than a simple aluminum box that originally had held Kodak film of 35-mm. size. Tom could read the words embossed on the side:

"Eastman Kodak Company Rochester New York."

What was there about the cylinder that made it sacred? According to the story Ojo had told in Oaxaca, Koerner had accumulated many metal cylinders over a number of years and periodically had turned them over to Itzacoatl.

Did the film containers hold objects that made them priceless treasures? Or had Koerner in his duplicity con-

vinced the Aztecs, and particularly Mixtli, that the boxes were endowed with properties and significance far out of proportion to their true value?

What would Koerner gain by this? What was Koerner after? Why had he gone to such lengths to become a man of power and influence among the Aztecs? Why had he taken such great pains to keep secret the location of the Lost Mesa?

Countless questions hammered at Tom's brain as he stood with Gulliver and Whiz while Mixtli chanted before the white crocodile. The priestess finished her incantation, turned and smiled at her guests as if nothing had happened. The anger was gone from her violet eyes and she had completely regained her composure.

Before she could speak, Whiz Walton stepped forward and pointed to the film container. Apparently his line of thought had been similar to Tom's.

"Do you mind," he asked, "if I look at that?"

The priestess shook her head. "It must not be touched," she said. "It is guarded by the white crocodile in whom resides the soul of Texcatlipoca. Tomorrow," she continued somewhat sadly, "one of you will meet him. Now we must feast in your honor."

Turning abruptly, the tiny woman with the violet eyes led the way down the stairs and across the room to the foods that had been spread out in honor of the youth who was to be offered as a sacrifice to Texcatlipoca, the supreme tutelary god of the Aztecs.

CHAPTER 18

Gulliver Goes Down

TOM QUEST knew that he should eat. He was seated cross-legged on the floor and before him lay the most elaborate meal he had ever seen. All manner of food had been spread out by the Indians who stood silently in the background.

Scarcely three hours had passed since Tom had been tightening his belt to alleviate the gnawing hunger during the walk through the jungle. At that time, he recalled, he had been scolding himself for not having eaten a heartier meal at noon. How long ago that seemed. Now, with every conceivable kind of Mexican and Aztec food before him, he had to force himself to eat.

He looked at Whiz Walton, who sat across from him. The reporter was eating, but mechanically and without relish. Mixtli, acting as hostess, sat on Tom Quest's left and Gulliver on his right.

The big man's appetite was unimpaired. He had reduced the intake of fuel for his overwhelming energies to the simple procedure of taking each dish as it came and working on it until it was empty. He was in no way choosey.

He began with the nearest plate, which happened to be tortillas. After wolfing these, he reached out for a bowl of frijoles. When that was empty, he started operations on another dish. The food was not seasoned to his liking, but he made it palatable by dousing each dish copiously with a liquid condiment whose chief ingredient was red-hot peppers.

Mixtli watched incredulously. She seemed fascinated by Gulliver's performance at the feast. When she saw the free and easy way in which the big man handled pepper sauce that would scorch a normal throat, she turned and beckoned to one of the attending Indians and whispered something in his ear. The Indian took the earthen vessel of spicy liquid and offered it to Mixtli, saying in the native tongue, "It is the same as usual."

Mixtli couldn't believe it. She poured a few drops into a shell, then sipped it cautiously.

"It's plenty hot," Whiz Walton said. "I know because I tried it."

The little priestess gasped. Tears sprang into her eyes and she reached for water. She drank, then looked at Gulliver more respectfully than before.

"Would yo' mind passin' back that pitcher o' sauce, Tom," Gulliver said.

Tom nodded and did as requested.

Gulliver poured several ounces of the stuff into his emptied water goblet. "Food like this," he said to Mixtli, "needs more seasonin'. If yo'd let me talk to yo' cook, I could show him how to give yo' grub authority."

He raised his goblet to his lips and emptied it in a single swallow.

Mixtli shook her head in disbelief, and the Indians in the background who had been watching the meal murmured low in admiration.

"Now," said Gulliver, waving a small cookie at Tom, "I aim to say a few things, an' I don't care who's listenin'. They's been some talk around here of offerin' one of us as a human sacrifice to that there Aztec god. Well, don't none o' yo' worry about *that*, because there ain't goin' to be no such thing."

He looked at Mixtli and grinned as disarmingly as possible. "Yo', ma'am," he began genially. "Yo' ain't goin' to let that polecat Koerner talk yo' into killin' me, are yo'?"

Mixtli smiled enigmatically and shook her head.

"I thought yo' wouldn't." Gulliver chuckled. "I tell yo', they's nothin' like sittin' down around a square meal to make folks friendly-like. Now that we know each other better, we ought to git along first rate. As soon as I'm done eatin', we'll talk about Koerner an' decide what we had best do with him."

Gulliver put his empty earthenware plate on top of

several others and reached for the platter that held broiled fish. He picked up one of the morsels daintily between his thumb and index finger. He was lifting it to his mouth when Mixtli said, "The youth called Tom is the one who must face sacrifice."

"Huh!" said Gulliver, lowering the fish. "Wha—what did yo' say?"

Mixtli pointed to Tom. "Our ancient law says that he who is to be offered to Texcatlipoca must be a youth of good strength."

"Now hold on," barked Gulliver indignantly. "Yo' can't touch Tom!"

He was on his feet, shaking his finger warningly at the priestess. "Yo' can't do it! By thunder, I read up about yo' habits an' customs, an' I know the rules blame near as well as yo' do! I read all about them sacrifices to old *Tex*, an' the rule says yo' got to take the strongest an' biggest o' yo' captives. That means me!"

His violent outburst brought a number of the watchful Indians to his side.

"Yo' can't sidetrack me for Tom Quest! He ain't nowhere near my size or weight!"

Itzacoatl raised his machete—the one that Gulliver had given him—and placed the point at the big man's chest. "Sit down," he said in English.

"Don't try shovin' me around," howled Gulliver. His hand came up like lightning. He snatched the big knife away from Itzacoatl. Then, gripping the handle in one

hand and the end of the blade in the other, he brought it down across his knee and broke it in two.

"Don't wag that thing at me!" he barked to Itzacoatl. "I don't like bein' threatened!" He threw the broken pieces of the blade to the floor, then turned to face the Indians.

"Any o' yo' critters that wants trouble," he cried, "just step right up an' I'll be downright accommodatin'!"

Tom saw Itzacoatl look to Mixtli for instructions. Then he saw the priestess shake her head and heard her say, "Wait. It will not be long."

Gulliver had assumed his fighting stance. His feet were wide apart and his fists were half-raised, ready for action.

"Step in!" he challenged. "One at a time or all at once!" He glowered at the Indians for several seconds. No one moved.

"All right, then," he continued. "Now I'll tell yo' somethin'. Me an' my pals are leavin' this here place. If we meet up with any argument, yo' medicine man will have some overtime work." Without turning, he said, "Whiz, git yo' shootin' iron again an' stand up here alongside o' me. Yo', Tom, git behind me. It's time for us to git gittin'. We—"

Something happened to Gulliver's voice. It cracked unexpectedly, leaving his sentence suspended.

Tom saw the big man unclench his right fist and pass his hand across his eyes. Gulliver's knees began to tremble.

"Gulliver, what's the matter?" Tom jumped to his friend's side.

Gulliver looked at Tom with a bewildered expression. His lips were moving but no sound came forth. The color drained from his face and a film seemed to drop over his eyes.

"Gulliver!" Tom said again, now genuinely alarmed. Then, "Whiz, come here! Something's happened to him!"

Gulliver reeled and staggered. Then his knees buckled and he slumped to the floor. Tom and Whiz hunched over their big friend. The boy felt for a pulse while the reporter unbuttoned the collar of Gulliver's shirt.

Then Tom felt a soft touch on his shoulder. Turning, he saw Mixtli at his side. "Do not be alarmed," the priestess said.

"What have you done to him?"

"It is not serious."

"You've poisoned him!"

"No."

"Then you've drugged him!"

"There was a powder in his food. Something to make him sleep well throughout the night without waking. He ate much."

"Then it was a drug, and he's had an overdose!"

"By daybreak he will be as well as ever. He will be able to attend the fiesta in the patio and in the market place."

Whiz Walton said, "I think she's telling the truth, Tom."

"I will have your friend carried to a room where he can sleep."

"What about us?" asked Whiz.

"It is time," replied the priestess, "for you also to retire. You will be summoned soon after daybreak and prepared for the feast in honor of Texcatlipoca."

CHAPTER 19

Koerner Moves in the Night

"Six men," muttered Whiz Walton.

He and Tom followed the Aztecs who carried Gulliver through long stone corridors in the temple. "They look like pallbearers," the irrepressible reporter remarked. "I suppose it would be just plain foolish for us to try to make a break for freedom," he added more seriously.

"We wouldn't have a chance," replied Tom. "In the first place, we'd have trouble finding our way out of this rat warren of a temple. And in the second place, a dozen Indians are right behind us."

Itzacoatl was leading the way through corridor after corridor all of which were dimly lighted by oil lamps and candles set in niches in rocky walls. Their footsteps on the flagstone floor resounded hollowly. In spite of the

grimness of the situation, Tom observed the massive stones that made up the walls and thought of the immense amount of manpower that must have been employed in building the Aztec city on the Mesa.

Itzacoatl finally came to a halt before a heavy door. He fitted a key into a huge iron lock. There was a rasping sound and then the door creaked open on complaining hinges.

What obviously was a sleeping chamber was a barren, stone-walled room lighted only by candles. On the floor were several pallets made of straw and cotton cloth. Against the wall there stood a stone altar. A candle burned at each end of the altar and in the center stood a crocodile of white clay with head and tail upraised. It was the same image that appeared on the main altar of the high priestess, only smaller. The altar and the pallets were the only furnishings in the room.

Tom noticed that one of the pallets was already occupied. The man who lay there stared unblinkingly at the new arrivals. He was Actl, stripped of his festive raiment and wearing only an untrimmed loincloth of red cotton.

At a word from Itzacoatl, the bearers lowered Gulliver to one of the empty pallets, then left the room.

"Is this the condemned men's cell?" asked Whiz Walton.

Itzacoatl made no reply. He backed through the doorway and closed the door. The bolt rasped in its slot as he turned the key outside.

"Some jail," observed Whiz. He looked down at Gulliver. "I wonder if there's anything we can do to snap the big guy out of his sleeping jag."

"There's not much to work with," replied Tom, looking about the room. "Not even water to bathe his face. I guess we better let him sleep it off."

"What about him?" asked the columnist, pointing to Actl. "Isn't he the chap who was condemned to death?"

"He looks like the same man. I'll try to talk to him."

Tom crouched beside the Indian and said slowly, "Your name is Actl?"

The face of the other was expressionless. He looked squarely at Tom Quest for a long moment, then deliberately turned his back so that he lay facing the wall.

Tom rose, shrugging his shoulders. "That," he said, "is that. I guess he doesn't want to talk."

"I've been looking around this room," said Whiz. "We can forget any notion of escaping. The door is the only opening big enough for a man to go through, and that door is at least three inches thick."

On the side of the room opposite the door, the wall was pierced by two apertures for ventilation. Each was about one foot in height, and no more than four inches in width. They were at shoulder level and looked out on a moonlit stretch of open ground that extended forty or fifty yards. There it ended abruptly.

"We're right near the edge of the Mesa," Tom said.

Whiz Walton pointed to the side of one of the aper-

tures. "Just look at that," he marveled. "The walls of this building are three feet thick!"

Tom grinned wryly. "There's only one way out," he said, "and that's the door. There's no use trying to break it down, but maybe a bullet or two would smash the lock."

Whiz Walton shook his head. "Not that lock," he said. "I took particular notice of it." Then, as an afterthought, "That priestess is certainly sure of herself, isn't she?"

"Why do you say that?"

"She's so confident that she didn't even have my gun taken away from me."

"Or my binoculars," replied Tom Quest. "I wonder why they didn't search us."

"Your guess is as good as mine, Tom. I'd say she's just too doggoned dignified to stoop to anything so commonplace. She knows we haven't a chance of escaping."

Tom sighed. "All we can do is wait to see what happens next. I wonder if we're going to drop like Gulliver did."

"The old girl said the food was drugged, but I don't feel the least bit drowsy."

"Neither do I," replied Tom. "Maybe we didn't eat enough."

The columnist unbuckled his cartridge belt and placed it on the floor, then sat down on the straw-filled mattress.

"I know what I'm going to do," he said, as he began unlacing his boots.

"What are you going to do, Whiz?"

"I'm going to make myself as comfortable as possible and you'd better do the same. We have a long night ahead of us."

"That's a good idea."

Tom sat down on the pallet next to Whiz and made a small pile of his boots, his binoculars and their carrying case, and his wide belt and hunting knife.

Whiz fumbled in his pockets until he found a crumpled pack of cigarettes and a wooden match. He cracked the match into flame with his thumbnail and lighted the cigarette. Then he lay back on the mattress and exhaled a thin stream of smoke toward the lofty ceiling. Tom Quest stretched out at his side.

For several minutes there was absolute silence in the dungeonlike room. The music and dancing in the streets had stopped and the community had settled itself for the night.

Presently Whiz Walton spoke. "Tom, don't let it get you too far down."

"What do you mean, Whiz?"

"That talk about being offered as a sacrifice."

"I'm trying not to think about that."

"I'll tell you why."

"Why what?"

"Why you shouldn't let it get you down." Whiz raised himself on an elbow and turned toward Tom. "Do you remember what the old girl said?"

"Mixtli?"

"Yeah. Do you remember what she said when she talked about the sacrifice?"

"She said a lot of things. Which one do you mean?"

"She didn't say for certain that anyone would be killed. She said that a prisoner would be offered. Remember that?"

Tom nodded.

"And then she said the Aztec god would take the life of no one but an enemy. If we were truly her friends, we would have nothing to worry about."

Tom looked at the reporter and smiled mirthlessly. "Thanks," he said, "for the encouragement."

Whiz Walton was in dead earnest. "She meant that."

"Aw now, Whiz—"

"She meant it!" repeated the columnist more emphatically than before. "Tom, there's a lot to that old girl. She's on the level and she's a whole lot smarter than you think. I've knocked around a lot and seen a lot of people in my job as a reporter. I've seen all kinds of characters in all walks of life, and I've become a pretty good judge. I can spot a phony in an instant. I can tell when someone's lying to me and when they're telling me the truth. And I'm telling you, son, old Mixtli has a lot on the ball. I think I have her sized up."

"How do you size her up?"

Whiz took another puff on his cigarette and exhaled slowly through his nostrils. He watched the smoke move lazily toward the ceiling.

"In the first place," he said, "she speaks fairly good English."

"I noticed that."

"She's well educated, Tom. She's done a lot of reading. I saw a lot of books in that room where we ate. Frankly, I think she's too smart to believe all that hokum about pleasing the Aztec gods by human sacrifice."

Tom pointed to Actl, who lay motionless, his face toward the wall. "She sounded serious enough when she was giving him the death sentence. If you're right, Whiz, why was she so concerned about that metal film container?"

"She knows what her subjects want, and she gives it to them because she wants to remain boss, but between you and me, Tom, Mixtli doesn't for one minute believe that Koerner is the guy whose coming has been prophesied. And she certainly doesn't expect him to lead the Aztecs from the Mesa in an uprising to take over the control of Mexico."

"But there's some understanding between Mixtli and Koerner."

"Maybe so," said Whiz.

"They're working together, and Koerner wants us killed."

"I have a hunch Mixtli will draw the line on that. You just remember what she said. She said no one but an enemy would die. You're no enemy. Therefore, you won't die."

Koerner moved silently through the moonlit night. He glanced over his shoulder toward the cluster of buildings dominated by the temple, then looked ahead toward a large pond. The surface of the water was glassy. There was not the slightest hint of stirring air to make a ripple.

It was an artificial lake that represented countless hours of labor on the part of many people. The surface of the Mesa at that point had been scooped out to make a deep receptacle for the rains that fell during certain seasons. The lake had a twofold purpose. It was a reservoir to supply the people of the settlement with water and it was also a home for a huge white crocodile, a man-eater in whom, according to the Aztecs, lived the spirit of their god Texcatlipoca.

Gulliver's jeep stood on the shore. Koerner examined the small car to make sure the key was in the ignition block. Moving to the front bumper, he untied the long, strong rope that had been used for towing and tossed it to one side. Then he inspected a raft floating on the surface of the lake. It was a large raft.

"Large enough," murmured Koerner, "to support the car quite easily."

The raft was tied to two stakes on shore. Koerner made sure it was secure, then stepped into the jeep.

"I'll run this car aboard," he muttered, "then I'll push the raft out into the middle of the pond."

Koerner would have preferred to unload the jeep and throw all the camping equipment and supplies into the water, but he wasn't sure enough of his position with old Mixtli. He didn't want to go too far. He didn't dare to do away permanently with the property of the white captives, but it would serve his purpose to put the car and its contents out of reach, in case one of the prisoners managed to get free.

He turned the ignition key and pressed his foot down on the starter. After a few seconds of grinding noises, the jeep came to life with explosive violence. The perfectly tuned motor was unmuffled. The roar filled the night like machine gunfire.

Koerner put the car in gear and ran it onto the raft, then shut off the motor, cut loose the raft and pushed it away from the shore.

Both Tom and Whiz leaped up from their pallets when they heard the jeep. They ran across their prison cell to the narrow slits that served as windows.

"It's the jeep!" cried Tom.

"You're telling me!"

"We can't see anything from this side."

"It's over in that direction," said Whiz Walton, pointing toward a blank wall. "Someone's driving it and I know who he is."

"Koerner."

"Right. No one else on this mesa would know how to start an automobile."

A heavy, booming voice cut in on the conversation. It was Gulliver. "Thunderation!" roared the big man, rising from the pallet where he had been lying in drugged sleep. "That's my jeep! They ain't another car alive can roar like that!"

"Gulliver!" cried Tom. "Are you all right?"

"Yo' bet I'm all right." Gulliver's fists were clenched. "What's goin' on outside? Where are we at? Who's drivin' the jeep?"

Whiz said, "We decided it must be Koerner."

"That ornery sidewinder! If ever I git my hands on him—"

The roar of the motor stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"Apparently," said Whiz, "he didn't drive far. How do you feel, big fella?"

"Me? I'm all right. I told yo' that."

"The sound of your motor did one good thing. It snapped you out of your coma."

"Coma?"

"You were drugged, Gulliver," Tom Quest said.

"You've been out cold for some time. Nothing we could do would rouse you."

Whiz said, chuckling at Gulliver's amazed expression, "You came to mighty fast when you heard your jeep."

"Why, doggone it," rumbled Gulliver with a dark scowl on his face, "I'd climb out o' my grave to git the skunk that stole that jeep!"

CHAPTER 20

Grim Awakening

TOM QUEST opened his eyes to find Itzacoatl shaking him gently by the shoulder. He sat up quickly, surprised to learn that he had slept.

Two brilliant shafts of sunlight spilled into the room through the narrow apertures and made two rectangles of light on the flagstone floor.

Tom glanced at his watch. It was just about the hour of sunrise. Whiz Walton and Gulliver lay on their respective pallets. They were wide awake but helpless. Strong cords circled them from shoulders to ankles, holding their arms lashed to their sides and their legs straight. They could scarcely move a muscle in such cocoonlike bindings.

Gulliver grumbled inarticulate things.

Whiz Walton said, "The Indians came here a few minutes ago and wrapped us up like mummies."

"And I didn't hear them?" exclaimed Tom in surprise.

"There wasn't much to hear. They gagged us before they started operations, and removed the gags when they were finished."

Tom looked up at Itzacoatl and for the first time noticed other Indians in the room. There were half a dozen of them, dressed in their festive robes and ornaments. They stood back near the wall.

Whiz said, "They've already taken Actl."

"Actl? Oh, the other prisoner." Tom saw that the pallet nearest the wall was empty.

"I'm afraid," the reporter went on, "they're waiting to take you."

In the confusion of waking from sound sleep, Tom momentarily had forgotten his grim appointment. This was the morning of the sacrifice. He felt a nudge and turning, saw Itzacoatl pointing to the boots and belt and other things Tom had left beside his mattress.

"Put on," the Indian said simply.

Silently the boy obeyed. He pulled on and laced his boots, buttoned the neck of his shirt and donned the rest of his equipment. The beaded scabbard which usually held his knife, he noticed, was empty, but he made no comment. If the Indians had taken it, it didn't matter. But perhaps Whiz Walton or Gulliver had managed in some way to secure and hide the knife in the hope of

being able to use it effectively on their ropes after the Indians had gone.

Tom glanced at the binocular case, then looked at Itzacoatl. The Indian said, "You wear." Then he added, "Take all medicine to sacrifice."

Tom had read enough to understand that the Indians looked on each item of the white man's equipment as medicine for good or evil. Tom was to be taken for judgment by the pagan Aztec god. His possessions must go with him to aid Texcatlipoca in deciding his fate.

When Tom picked up the case, he knew by its weight that the high-powered binoculars were inside. He put the strap over his shoulder. Then he stood erect, head high, and looked squarely at the Aztec priest. "Now what?" he demanded.

At a gesture from the leader, one of the Indians stepped from the background holding a long garment of loosely woven cloth. In color and ornamentation it was far more brilliant than the clothing of the Indians. He draped it over Tom Quest's shoulders and stepped back. A second Indian produced a length of cord. Itzacoatl took Tom's hands and crossed them while the other wound the rope about the boy's tanned wrists and tied it firmly. A third man stepped forward holding a sort of brazier in which incense smoldered. He waved the earthen vessel slowly back and forth before Tom's face, while in an undertone he murmured words Tom couldn't comprehend.

Throughout the ritual, both Whiz and Gulliver strained at the cords that held them. Their faces were purple with the frenzied efforts they were making to get free to help Tom Quest before it was too late. Not that they could have been of much help. Any fight would be a futile effort against the overwhelming number of Aztecs, but it would be infinitely better to die fighting than to lie there helpless while the boy who meant so much to them—the boy Whiz Walton admired, the boy whom Gulliver loved as a son—was led like a sheep to slaughter.

The heavy redwood door swung open.

"You go," said Itzacoatl, pointing. "You follow Tepeyec."

Tepeyec was the Aztec with the incense. He led the way and Tom, surrounded by the other Indians, was forced to follow. It was a silent procession that moved through corridor after lengthy corridor of the temple to the room where Tom and his companions had met Mixtli and participated in her feast.

The aged priestess was there to meet them. She was weighted down with ornaments and trinkets and wore an elaborate headdress made of feathers interwoven with twigs and ribbons. Massive golden earrings dangled from her ears. Jeweled rings on her fingers caught and reflected sunlight that came from openings in the wall. She stood majestically on the dais before the altar on which the white stone crocodile rested. Her face was an expressionless mask when her violet eyes met Tom Quest's steady

gaze. She looked at the boy for fully a moment before she spoke.

"You are the honored one. The other already has been disposed of."

"The other?" Tom repeated.

"Actl, who was condemned to die. For him there is no uncertainty."

Tom caught the shred of hope and clung to it desperately. "You—you mean," he faltered, "there is uncertainty in my case?"

"You are to be offered to Texcatlipoca. The choice is his. He may accept your soul when it is offered."

"Last night you said he would take the life of no one but an enemy." Despite his efforts to control his voice, Tom knew he sounded tense and uncertain. He must at all costs maintain his poise. He must not lose face before these Indians. He swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump in his throat.

Mixtli nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I," continued Tom, "am not an enemy."

"We shall see." The priestess waved her bejeweled hand imperiously and Itzacoatl, who had silently appeared, instructed the man with the incense to lead the way.

Tom moved like an automaton from the inner chamber of the temple, through the long outer room and onto the sunlit terrace.

His appearance was greeted by the cries and shouts of

a multitude of people who had gathered in their festive attire. His appearance was a signal to the musicians. Strange, weird music of flutes and drums set the pace for dancers.

The procession moved on without halting down a long flight of wide stone stairs, then through a narrow, crowded street. It was the market place, lined on both sides by booths where vendors offered objects of every description. There was pottery for sale, long gourds for sucking the pulque from the maguey plants, many sweets, and little corn cakes shaped like animals. There were piles of sugar cane for sale and seeds of many colors. There were candles made of beeswax, and amulets and carvings made of wood.

At any other time Tom would have been keenly interested in wares that harkened back to a civilization that had long been lost. He moved on between his guards, three on either side. Itzacoatl followed, and Mixtli, with two girls in attendance, brought up the rear.

Tom noticed other temples and then, on both sides of the market square, many homes, some made of stone and some of straw. After that came open country, and Tom saw the jeep. It seemed to be standing in the center of a pond. Coming nearer, he realized that it was resting on a raft. He thought bitterly of how different things might have been if Gulliver and Whiz had been able to make use of certain items in that car.

The slow march ended at the water's edge. There was

a gentle slope extending about ten yards from a clump of stunted fir trees to the water. Here Tom was instructed to lie down between two rocks, each one weighing several hundred pounds. A stout white rope that looked brand new had been passed around each rock and tied. The free end of one was fastened about Tom's neck. The other was tied to his ankles. As he lay on the ground he was free to move a few inches to either side, but it was utterly impossible for him to roll away or to gain his feet. He couldn't even rise to a sitting position.

Mixtli now was standing at his side. Silently she raised her hands over his upturned face in a gesture of blessing. Then she turned and faced the pond. She continued to stand there with both hands extended at arm's length. Suddenly she broke into a high-pitched chant, strangely melodic for one so old. The chant was taken up by the priests, and when she had finished, Itzacoatl offered his arm and escorted the priestess back toward the buildings and the temple, leaving Tom alone, uncomfortable and wondering what was coming next.

CHAPTER 21

The White Crocodile

I WONDER if I'll ever ride in the jeep again," thought Tom Quest wistfully. He lay flat on his back near the edge of the pond. His head was turned slightly to the left so that he could look at the snub-nosed little car on the raft, floating about fifty yards from shore.

He lay quite still, but not because of resignation. He wasn't ready to admit defeat. He was simply biding his time, waiting until he was sure that Mixtli and her followers had rejoined the dancers and musicians on the terrace above. He could hear the distant drums and flutes at the far end of the Mesa where the buildings stood, and he could hear the chants of the dancers in the market place. Near by, the only sound to be heard was the gentle ripple

of the tiny waves that washed the shore. The sun had risen higher. Tom turned his head to protect his eyes from the brilliant glare and decided he had waited long enough.

"Now to see what I can do about these ropes," he muttered.

He soon learned that there was little he could do. He could bend both elbows to raise and lower his hands, which had been lashed together at the wrists, but his upper arms were bound securely to his sides. With the tips of his fingers he could touch the rope around his neck, but he couldn't reach the knot in back. There was a little slack in the rope that ran to the heavy rock three feet from his head. By inching downward with his body until that rope was taut he could feel the cord between his ankles and the other rock go slack. Now, he could flex his knees, but only slightly. He could not hope to reach the knots at his ankles.

He quickly realized that his only hope lay in the faint possibility of getting his hands apart. Having decided on this course of action, he put all of his strength into the effort. He strained until the muscles on his arms were trembling and the cords cut deeply into his wrists. Then he relaxed but found to his chagrin that he hadn't stretched the bindings in the slightest.

He was breathing hard and his face was flushed. He was hot and perspiration soaked his clothes. His wrists were sore and his muscles ached. He waited until his

breathing again was normal, then made another effort to get enough play to slip one hand loose. By this time he realized his efforts must be futile, but he had to keep trying.

An hour went by marked by intermittent struggles of the prisoner. Then Tom closed his eyes and tried to think. Why had he been left between those rocks beside the pond? How soon would he know whether or not the Aztec god would take his life? How would this god manifest himself? In what form would Texcatlipoca appear? If he were to die, what would be the nature of his death? What would happen if he did not die? Would he be held prisoner, or would he be freed? And what about Whiz Walton and Gulliver? What would their fate be?

And then Tom Quest heard footsteps. He opened his eyes and saw Koerner advancing to his side. The tall man looked down at Tom and leered.

"In Florida," he said, "I was the prisoner. Here the situation is reversed."

"You'll be a prisoner again," Tom said defiantly. "Sooner or later you'll be discovered and taken back to the States."

"You are wrong," replied Koerner. "I have planned too long and too well. I shall never again become a prisoner. Instead I shall become a king!"

Tom looked up sharply. The words were those of a madman with wild, impossible dreams and ambitions, but their utterance was calm, flat and factual. Koerner's

pale eyes were cold. He spoke with the cool assurance of one who was confident of his position.

"I don't care," he continued, "whether or not you believe that statement. You probably think that your father will send parties out to look for you. Perhaps you think I shall be found, captured and turned over to the authorities here in Mexico, after which there would be extradition proceedings to return me to the States."

Koerner laughed softly and mirthlessly. "The authorities in Mexico," he repeated, holding out one hand, palm up and clawlike fingers extended, "are right here in the palm of my hand. I have them like this—" he closed his fingers, clenching his fist until the bony knuckles stood out.

"It has taken a long time, much thought and careful planning to secure a grip such as mine, but it will prove to be worth all the effort, because, as I said, I shall be the one man in Mexico whom no one will dare defy."

"What about Mixtli?" taunted Tom. "I didn't see her taking any orders from you."

"Mixtli!" spat the lean man.

"She told you where to head in."

"I will admit she has been useful, but her usefulness is nearly at an end." Koerner squatted and felt the rope around Tom's wrists. "The skin is chafed," he observed. "It is not necessary to struggle so to gain your freedom."

"No?"

"By no means." Koerner brought a clasp knife from his hip pocket and flicked open the long blade by pressing on a spring.

"With this knife," he said, "I could easily cut that rope."

"You could also cut my throat, and that's more likely."

Koerner's lips curled back from his yellow teeth. When he smiled his face took on the appearance of a death's-head. He shook his bald head slowly. "If I wanted you to die, I would simply leave you for Texcatlipoca. I came here to save you."

"At what price?"

Koerner's hand dipped into another pocket. He produced a folded paper. "Last night in the temple," he said, "I spoke of a letter to your father. I have it here. It is a simple letter requesting him to come and bring Señor Gonzales with him."

Tom said, "So you *are* afraid. In spite of all you said you are afraid that Dad will send a rescue party. Even though it's too late to save my life, they'll find you here."

Koerner stopped smiling. His face went hard. His mouth became a thin, hard line. The veins in his temples stood out throbbing with suppressed rage. "You fool!" he snapped. "I offer you a chance to live."

"I don't believe you. You want to use me to get Dad and Señor Gonzales here because they know about this Lost Mesa. When you have them, you'll kill all of us."

Koerner stood up and said, "You are wrong. I want your father here because I can use him and Señor Gonzales as well. They can become important men in Mexico, and—" Koerner's voice rose to a higher pitch, "—so can your friends who are prisoners in the temple.

"I might add this. If you choose to remain here and die, *they* will die soon after."

Lying on his back, Tom looked up at the infuriated man.

"Now," said Koerner, "what is your decision? Will you sign this letter to your father?"

"No."

"In that case, I leave you to be killed by Texcatlipoca."

Tom was determined to maintain a bold front. "I've been waiting a long time," he said. "Texcatlipoca seems to be late for his appointment."

"He will soon come ashore. Then you will wish he had been later for his—appointment."

"Come ashore?"

"Right now he is on the raft beside your jeep, but he will not be there long."

Tom turned to look out over the water. On the large raft lay a hideous figure, dirty white in color. The head was longer and narrower than those of the alligators he had seen in the lake beside the jungle clearing.

"A—a crocodile!" he gasped.

Koerner chuckled at the boy's wide-eyed surprise and

into his ugly face there came a look of sadistic pleasure.

"The largest you have ever seen," he said. "It is the sacred white crocodile—a man-eater."

"Is—is that *Texcatlipoca?*"

"Didn't you know it?"

"N-no."

"Mixtli should have told you. These stupid, pagan Indians believe that the spirit of their god lives in the repulsive body of that reptile."

Now Tom grasped the significance of the many white statues of crocodiles he had seen inside the temple.

Koerner continued. "Soon he will leave the raft. You will see him enter the water. You will see his ugly figure swimming this way. You will see him leave the water and crawl toward you, and you will be helpless. Then it will be too late to change your mind. Then you will wish you had signed this letter."

Koerner was gratified when he saw horror drain the color from Tom Quest's face.

"Old Mixtli," the man went on, "has strange beliefs. She thinks that the crocodile will take the life of no one but an enemy. If I cut your ropes so you can return to the village, she will think it is the decision of the god Texcatlipoca. Instead of being dead, as an enemy, you will be honored and your friends will be released and honored also. Now, perhaps, you will change your mind. Perhaps you would like to sign the letter and trust me."

"Koerner, I'd rather trust that crocodile."

Koerner snapped the clasp knife closed, turned on his heel and left without another word.

His movement seemed to catch the crocodile's attention. The ugly creature lifted its head and moved its tail, then sluggishly it crawled to the edge of the raft and slithered into the water.

CHAPTER 22

The Man Who Was Doomed

TOM FELT SURE that his life was measured in seconds—minutes at the most. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the sight of the huge white reptile that was swimming lazily above the lake. The crocodile was not in any hurry, but sooner or later it would reach the shore, and after that—Tom refused to think about his fate. He concentrated on memories. He crowded his brain with scene after scene from past adventures.

He thought of his first meeting with Whiz Walton on the train in Texas, and then of the trip to Ecuador and Peru with Gulliver and Whiz. He thrilled at the recollection of his reunion with his father. Like pictures on a movie screen, the jungle scene dissolved into a night on

the high seas off the coast of Florida and the adventure in which funny little Captain Popple had played such a prominent role. That was the adventure that had ended in the Florida Everglades with Koerner in the hands of the law. There had been a happy reunion in Hamilton Quest's home near Miami. Tom remembered each detail of that reunion. He remembered Whiz Walton and his friend the insurance detective telling about the mystery of the cypress stump, and Gulliver's lurid description of the Seminole village. And then his father Hamilton Quest had cleared up the mystery of a strange fire with a demonstration showing how a magnifying glass had concentrated the sun's rays and started the fire. In lieu of a magnifying glass, he had unscrewed one lens of his high-powered binoculars. Those were the same binoculars that Tom had brought to Mexico. They were with him at this very moment.

An idea struck the boy with the sudden impact of a bolt of lightning. It drove away all reminiscences and brought him back to the present. Opening his eyes, he saw the crocodile still in the pond but nearer than before.

"Maybe I can do it," he grunted, as he shifted his body, squirming to his side to bring the binocular case within reach of his tied hands. "I've got to do it!"

The ropes about his wrists had slowed the circulation until his fingers were almost numb. They were clumsy and awkward, but he managed to open the case and slide out the binoculars.

Crossed as his hands were, he could use but one at a time. He groped and fumbled and it was ten minutes before he could unscrew one of the big lenses, and that was the simplest part of his undertaking. Painful contortions were required to hold the lens between a thumb and finger in such a way that the sun's rays were focused to a tiny dot of white heat that struck his flesh and hurt. It took an almost superhuman effort to turn his hand and bring the dot of sunlight on the cord around his wrists. His hands were trembling.

"Got to hold them still," he gritted. "Got to keep that sunlight focused on one spot."

The crocodile was nearing shore now, and its ugly eyes were turned in Tom's direction.

"It won't be long now."

A thin wisp of smoke rose from the cords. It thickened and increased. From the corner of his eye, the boy could see that Texcatlipoca had reached the shore. The giant reptile was crawling in his direction.

"Steady," he told himself. "Got to hold that sunlight steady."

The rope was blackened where the spot of light struck, then the black ends turned red and fiber after fiber parted.

"Another minute—give me another minute," Tom prayed.

Five seconds passed, then five more. He felt the heat of the burning rope and then it parted. His hands were

free! He could reach the rope across his chest, the one that held his upper arms close to his sides. He tugged at it and moved it inch by inch until the knot slid around where he could touch it.

His fingers tingled with restored circulation. He ignored this as he worked on the knot. And then his upper arms were free. He could reach a small clasp knife in his hip pocket. The rest was easy. He cut the cord about his throat and sat up and freed his ankles.

The white crocodile, meanwhile, had halted. It lay motionless just a few feet distant and seemed to be quite interested in the boy.

"Free!" cried Tom exultantly as he leaped to his feet. "I made it!"

Now there was no reason to fear the crocodile. He could easily outrun the reptile. But he didn't run. He had other plans. He picked up the lens that had saved his life and put it back on the binoculars, then returned the glasses to their case. He left the case on the ground and with it the ceremonial robe that had been draped around his shoulders. He added the belt and boots, and then his shirt.

The crocodile was motionless save for a slight movement of the long, thin head. Now Tom could laugh at the hideous creature.

"Stay right there," he said, "and we'll get along just fine."

In his stocking feet he raced to the edge of the pond

and took off in a shallow dive. His swift, clean racing-crawl stroke took him quickly to the raft. He pulled himself out of the water and scrambled into the jeep. The camping equipment and other gear were just as he had left them.

The fishing tackle was in a tubular container with a screw cap. Tom fitted the sections of a pole together and selected the heaviest of the lead sinkers. This he tied to the end of a strong line wound on a reel. He stood on the seat to make a cast. He lowered the pole with its dangling weight over his shoulder and aimed at the trees near shore.

"This," he told himself, "is one time when I need a tangled line."

He cast. The reel spun as the weight shot out. It arced high and fell amid a tangle of underbrush.

Tom reeled in the slack. The line grew taut. The weight had wound around the underbrush; it was securely fastened there. He pulled on the line; then pulled a little harder, and then—a little harder.

Nothing happened.

The loaded jeep was heavy, but Tom maintained his steady pull and presently the raft began to move. At first the movement was almost imperceptible. Then tiny ripples showed at the shoreward edge.

Tom dropped the fish pole and took hold of the line itself. He pulled it in as the raft gained headway. A foot, a yard, two yards—he was going to make it! The raft

touched shore and Tom dropped into the driver's seat and stamped the starter of the jeep. He shifted into low gear as the motor roared, then let the clutch in suddenly. The jeep shot forward, bounced off the edge of the raft, splashed in a narrow strip of water, then fairly charged up the slightly inclined bank. It would have rammed into a tree if Tom hadn't jammed on the brakes.

He cut the motor and hurried to the place where he had left his boots, binoculars and other things that had been discarded for the swim.

The white crocodile had disappeared, but that didn't matter now. Tom's mind was full of other things as he sat down to lace his boots. Though he was free, he was by no means out of danger. Whiz Walton and Gulliver were still held captive in the temple, and Koerner was as dangerous as ever.

What was the next move?

The answer came in an unearthly scream of mortal terror. It was a shrill, wild scream from some place close at hand. The source was hidden by dense trees. And then it came again, more horrible, more nerve-jangling than before.

Tom leaped in the direction of the sound. He plunged through the underbrush and ducked around huge trees. He found the white crocodile.

And the beast had found a captive Aztec.

The Indian, stripped of all his gaudy raiment, was

bound in an upright position by many coils of rope to the trunk of a tree. The cloth that had held a gag in his mouth was loose around his neck. The Indian didn't see Tom Quest. His eyes, wide and fear-filled, were on the man-eater called Texcatlipoca.

Tom knew the man. It was the former priest, Actl.

CHAPTER 23

Tom's Conquest

Tom Quest picked up a rock the size of a baseball and let drive with all the strength of his pitching arm. The crocodile was hit amidships. It flipped its scaly tail and jerked its snout in the direction of the sudden attack.

Tom had another rock in readiness. He threw with unerring aim and caught the ugly creature on a bony spot between the eyes. The crocodile thrashed its tail in anger and turned from Actl to face the newcomer.

The fear in Actl's face gave way to incredulity tinged with hope. He shouted a warning as Texcatlipoca started toward Tom Quest.

The crocodile's great jaws were working. His advance, though slow, had about it the ponderous invincibility of a tank.

Tom stood his ground. He threw another stone that

glanced off the giant reptile's back, and then he picked up a section of a broken branch that lay near by. He gripped it by the two-inch butt and held it like a lance. The other end had a spread of four or five feet made up of countless minor branches to which dead leaves still clung. These rustled when the branch was moved.

Tom jammed the brush directly at the crocodile's gaping mouth. To Texcatlipoca it must have been a novel and particularly annoying situation.

Tom drew back and jabbed again and again. The crocodile's advance was halted. He turned. Tom jabbed the head, the face, the eyes relentlessly until the huge reptile moved in retreat toward the security of the pond.

Tears of gratitude sprang into Actl's eyes, and he mouthed a rapid flow of Aztec words as Tom Quest used his pocketknife to cut the ropes and free the native. Released from the tree, Actl dropped to the ground and threw his arms around his rescuer's knees. Tom felt embarrassed by such a display of emotion.

"Get up," he said.

Actl raised his head and looked up questioningly.

Tom grasped him by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "I thought you were dead," he said, trying to convey his meaning to the Aztec by means of gestures, in an impromptu sign language.

Actl's face finally cleared comprehendingly. He spoke rapidly in his native tongue. Tom shook his head helplessly, whereupon the Aztec indicated by gestures that

Tom was to remain where he was. Then, with the one word, "Itzacoatl," Actl ran fleetly through the underbrush and was soon out of sight.

Left alone, Tom debated whether it was wise to allow Itzacoatl to find him here, and decided to risk it. Obviously, Actl had some plan in mind.

When, a little later, Actl quietly reappeared with Itzacoatl, Tom knew at once from the expression on the priest's face that he was friendly. The first thing he said was:

"Actl my brother priest, my good friend. You save life. I thank you."

During the next five minutes, Tom Quest got the story in bits and snatches. The explanation as he learned it was a simple one. Itzacoatl had been unwilling to carry out the orders of the priestess which were to put Actl to death at daybreak. The chief of the priests had felt the sentence to be unjust and had decided to appeal to what he considered a higher court. Assisted by his followers, Itzacoatl had brought Actl to the secluded spot not far from the pond. He had gagged the condemned man and tied him to the tree, firmly convinced that if death were a justifiable sentence for Actl's misdeed, Texcatlipoca would administer the penalty.

Actl, still visibly shaken by his narrow escape, pleaded with Tom Quest, through Itzacoatl, to save his life.

"But his life has been saved," protested the boy.

Itzacoatl shook his head and explained that Actl was

still in mortal danger and was thoroughly convinced that somehow the Aztec gods would mete out justice. He said Actl had confessed that he had lied to Mixtli.

This statement surprised Tom Quest. Further questioning brought out strange revelations, and then the Indian once more begged for help.

"All right," Tom said emphatically. "Tell him he'll get help. All the help he needs."

Itzacoatl nodded quickly.

"I've got to get to that room in the temple—the room where we were imprisoned," Tom said.

"Your friends," said Itzacoatl, "are still there."

Tom said, "I've got to reach them without being seen. Can you lead the way?"

Itzacoatl said he knew many secret doors and hidden corridors within the temple walls. He was sure he could lead Tom unnoticed to the prison cell. Everyone by now would be at the ceremonies being held in the market place.

Tom stopped at the jeep just long enough to transfer certain items to his pockets, then set out, following the Indians. As he walked he felt a thrill of exultation at the thought that Actl and Itzacoatl had furnished information that brought him very close to a discovery of gigantic magnitude.

CHAPTER 24

The Aztec Secret

GULLIVER and Whiz Walton, lying tightly bound on their pallets in the bare, stone-walled room, had heard the familiar sound of the jeep in the distance, but neither had made any comment.

They were beyond caring what happened to the small car or its contents. It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered. Not even their own grim, hopeless predicament. They were haunted by the lingering picture of Tom Quest as he had marched, head high, from the cell.

The reporter glanced at Gulliver and saw a man who had given up. Gulliver was crushed and defeated. His expression of utter despair stirred even the experienced reporter.

In his long and varied career, Whiz Walton had seen heavyweight champions dethroned. He had seen great

favorites humbled. At times these had been pitiful spectacles, but nothing to compare with the sight of Gulliver, who had always been a fighting tower of strength, now quiet, heartsick and merely marking time for the welcome release that death would bring.

Gulliver wasn't even angry. His thundering fury had overwhelmed all other emotions and had finally burned itself out. Gulliver didn't want to live. There was nothing left to live for. He couldn't go back to civilization without Tom.

Whiz Walton heard the sound of footsteps in the flagstone corridor beyond the door. Someone who wore hard-heeled boots was coming. That would be Koerner.

The footsteps halted at the door. There was a rasping sound as the heavy lock was operated. The door creaked on its hinges and swung inward.

Actl stepped through the opening, followed by Itzacoatl.

Itzacoatl held his hand across his mouth as a warning gesture of silence while he looked first at Whiz, then at Gulliver. He stepped quickly to one side, then closed the door after Tom Quest had entered the cell.

The columnist and Gulliver were speechless. It was an unprecedented instance that found two voluble, fast-talking individuals wholly at a loss for words at one and the same time—and it wasn't because of Itzacoatl's warning.

Tom had been given up as dead, and yet here he was,

not only alive, but able to play the role of rescuer.

"Hold still," he said to Whiz, who was nearest, as he opened his pocketknife. "I'll have you out of those ropes in a jiffy."

The reporter became matter-of-fact. This wasn't the time to ask questions. "Your sheath knife," he said, "is under this mattress right near my hips. It'll go through these ropes a lot faster."

Tom found his hunting knife and went to work while Actl and Itzacoatl stood silent near the door.

"You were asleep when the Indians came to tie us," the columnist explained. "I had a chance to slip your knife out of its sheath, and hide it beneath the mattress. I thought it might come in handy, but you can see I didn't have a chance to move a finger."

"You can move now," Tom said as he stepped to the side of Gulliver.

The big man's voice was low and husky. "Yo', Tom—"

"Take it easy, Gulliver. Did you hear the jeep?"

Gulliver nodded slowly.

"I found it. I was running it."

The big man's expression didn't change. He looked at the boy stupidly; his eyes seemed glazed, and then he murmured again in the same dull, lifeless voice.

"Yo', Tom—I—I can't believe it."

"You can't believe what?"

"I—I'm dreamin'. That must be it."

Tom cut through the last of the cords. "Now you're

free," he said. "Sit up. Sit up and pinch yourself. You're not dreaming. I have a lot to tell you!"

Gulliver sat up stiffly and reached out his great hairy hands to clutch Tom Quest by the shoulders.

"Yo'—yo' ain't dead!"

"Of course I'm not dead. Listen to me, Gulliver. I've learned where—"

Tom couldn't finish the sentence.

Realization that Tom Quest actually was alive, that this was no dream, that hope was not all gone, struck big Gulliver like three sharp bolts of lightning.

He didn't whisper now. He cried out explosively. "Yo' are alive!"

His mighty arms wrapped Tom in a bearlike hug. "Yo're here! Oh, son, I never thought I'd look on yo' again."

Then Gulliver was on his feet, swinging his arms to restore the circulation.

"Yo', Whiz, git to yo' feet! Tom Quest is back! Now we got some cause to fight! We got things to do! I aim to take this place apart an' start rappin' some Injun heads together!"

Two great strides took him across the room. One hand closed around the neck of Actl, the other, Itzacoatl.

"Right here," the big man said, "is where I'm goin' to begin!"

"Wait a minute, Gulliver!" Tom cried out. "Those two are on our side! Let them go and listen to me!"

Gulliver released the natives.

"I was trying to tell you—" Tom began.

"Tell me how yo' come to be alive!"

As quickly as possible, Tom told how he had been left on the shore of the pond. He described Koerner's visit and explained how he had used the binocular lens to escape from the ropes.

"The jeep," he said, "was on a raft. I swam out to it and got it ashore."

He didn't bother to detail the use of the strong fishline or his fight with the white crocodile. He simply said he had found Actl tied to a tree and released him.

"And then," Tom went on, "he motioned to me to wait, and he went and got Itzacoatl and brought him back to where I was. It took a long time to get the story. You can see how long it took," Tom pointed out, "because my clothes are dry and they were dripping wet after my swim to get the jeep.

"Actl didn't find that aluminum container in the mud! He found it in the temple right near Mixtli's altar!"

"About a week ago, Actl was in the inner chamber of the temple, the place where we were taken to meet Mixtli. He had gone there to refill the lamps with oil. Mixtli came in with Koerner. They closed the door carefully, and thought they were alone in the room. Neither of them saw Actl. They seemed to be having an argument, but they were speaking in English and Actl didn't know what they were saying.

"He was afraid that Mixtli would be angry if she knew he had witnessed the argument, so he hid behind the main altar."

"The one on the platform?" asked Whiz Walton.

Tom said, "Yes. Pretty soon Mixtli came up to the platform and stood right before the altar. If Actl had stood up he could have reached across the altar and touched her."

"Then what?"

Tom said, "Do you remember the statue of a crocodile on that altar?"

"Yeah."

"So do I," put in Gulliver.

"Well, Mixtli pushed that statue to one side. Beneath it, there was a hole cut through the stone top of the altar. She reached into the hole and brought out several of those metal film containers. Koerner opened a couple of them and looked inside. He seemed to be satisfied with what he found. Then Mixtli brought out some more, and all the while Actl was behind the altar.

"Altogether, I guess the priestess took out twenty-five or thirty boxes and Koerner counted them, then put them back into the hiding place.

"One of them rolled off the altar and fell right into Actl's hands. It wasn't missed. Mixtli moved the crocodile's statue back over the hole, then she and Koerner left the room."

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed Whiz Walton. "Actl had

a lot of nerve to wear that box as a decoration! How did he expect to get away with it?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know that."

"What was in it?"

"I guess it held some film. Actl didn't touch the contents."

Gulliver said, "How come Itzacoatl is here with Actl? I thought it was Itzacoatl who took him out to be executed."

Tom said, "The two are very close friends. Itzacoatl is loyal to old Mixtli, but he doesn't approve of Koerner."

"He did approve of Koerner," the reporter said. "What changed his mind?"

Itzacoatl was the one who answered the question. "I have kept close watch on man with white skin. I have seen fight three times. Trouble is in air."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the columnist.

"I got the details," Tom said. "Koerner sent all of those metal containers to the temple and convinced Mixtli that they were very strong medicine. Now Koerner wants them back and Mixtli won't give them up. I don't know for sure, but it's my guess that when Actl learned about the hiding place, Mixtli was simply showing Koerner that the 'strong medicine' was safe inside the altar."

"Just a minute, Tom," the reporter said. He looked at

Itzacoatl suspiciously. "Yesterday you were all for Koerner. What happened between yesterday and today?"

"I can tell you that, Whiz," Tom said. "Two things happened."

"Yeah?"

"About three o'clock this morning Itzacoatl went to the inner chamber of the temple to burn some incense and try to influence the god Texcatlipoca to spare the life of Actl. On his way out he passed the door to Mixtli's sleeping quarters. He saw Koerner, fully dressed, standing at the door. Koerner had a knife. He left in a hurry and Itzacoatl slept outside old Mixtli's door all the rest of the night.

"Then, today, when he saw that I had not been killed by the white crocodile, he made his final decision. I was alive, and therefore a friend."

Itzacoatl spoke. "Texcatlipoca," he said slowly, "not take life of youth. Texcatlipoca take life of no one but enemy. Man with white skin call you enemy. Texcatlipoca say he speak with forked tongue."

"That's right," Tom said. "Koerner lied to you about us."

The Aztec priest turned to face Tom squarely. "You," he said, "make promise."

Tom nodded and said, "I'm not forgetting that."

"What did yo' promise, Tom?" asked Gulliver.

"I told Itzacoatl that if he would help me get you and

Whiz out of here, we'd capture Koerner and take him away with us."

Gulliver grinned widely. "Yo' can say that again!"

And then the grin froze on his face.

Someone had started the engine of the jeep. The car was being driven hard and it was coming nearer, through the market place and toward the temple.

CHAPTER 25

The Lioness

KOERNER didn't know where Tom had gone, and didn't care. He had returned to the pond to make sure of the boy's death, and had found the empty ropes and the discarded sacrificial robe. He knew, when he saw the jeep removed from the raft and parked on the shore, that Tom Quest had escaped. The fish pole lying near by, and the line still tangled in the underbrush explained how the small car had been drawn ashore.

Koerner swore softly.

The boy's escape made his personal situation more critical than ever. Itzacoatl's eyes had held a strange expression when the two had met at Mixtli's door in the middle of the night.

Koerner had anticipated trouble, and now that Tom

Quest was free, the superstitious Indians might turn on the other man whose skin was white.

For years Koerner had been accumulating microfilm in aluminum containers. Now he was ready to use that film and Mixtli had refused to give it up.

Standing there beside the jeep, the lean man decided on a bold and final move. The gasoline gauge showed that the tank was more than half full, and there was a reserve supply in five gallon cans.

He would run the jeep to the foot of the stone steps leading to the temple's main gate, and would leave it there with the motor running.

He would make a sudden dash into the temple through the anteroom to the inner chamber and the highest altar. He would take his films from their hiding place within the altar and return to the jeep.

He had a gun. He would shoot anyone who tried to stop him. He could drive down the spiraling roadway to the level plain and there was sufficient gasoline to take him to the jungle through which he knew the way back to civilization.

He took a stubby pistol from his pocket, made sure that it was fully loaded, then climbed into the driver's seat and headed for the temple.

Koerner stopped just where he had planned to at the foot of a long flight of shallow stone stairs leading to the wide main entrance to the temple. He backed the jeep

around so it was pointed for a fast getaway, then stepped out, leaving the motor idling.

He pushed past the Indians who gathered to look curiously at the car, and strode up the stairs. He saw no one in the outer room and decided that luck was with him when he found the heavy redwood door to the inner chamber wide open.

The place was tomblike in its silence. High windows admitted light, but not air. Smoke from the incense burners hung almost motionless until stirred by the swift, purposeful passage of the long-legged plotter.

Koerner went directly to the altar on the dais and shoved aside the white statue of the crocodile. He reached into the cavity and brought up a handful of the little metal cylinders which he shoved into a pocket of his jacket. He filled that pocket, then took out his gun and placed it on the altar to make room for more of his valuable films.

His hands trembled with eagerness. He filled the second pocket and there were still more films left over. He had just finished stowing these in his trousers when he heard the heavy door slam with a dull boom that echoed in the high-ceilinged room. He mouthed a violent oath as he snatched up his gun and turned.

Mixtli stood at the far end of the room with her back against the door. Her violet eyes were fixed on Koerner. She grasped the situation at once. The displaced statue

and Koerner's bulging pockets told her what the thin man had done, and if she needed further proof of his guilt she found it in his face and in the threatening way he held the gun.

The priestess uttered a wild scream of unbounded rage. Then, at the top of her voice, she called Koerner by name and called him a thief, a liar, and a desecrater of the temple.

"This is the end!" she shrilled as she turned and locked the door. "You are evil. You shall not leave this place alive!"

Koerner's gun spat flame. It was a heavy-caliber gun, but it had been designed to be carried in a man's pocket, and the barrel was only two inches in length. At close range it was deadly, but accurate shooting beyond ten feet or so was practically impossible. That first shot went wild, smashing against the stones that framed the door.

Mixtli went into action like some jungle beast. She was like an enraged lioness whose cubs are threatened by a deadly enemy. She snatched a knife from somewhere beneath the folds of her clothing and charged toward Koerner without regard for danger.

Koerner fired again and then again. When he saw that both shots had missed the little priestess, he shouted hysterical curses at his luck. He fired his fourth shot when Mixtli was near the bottom step.

This time his aim was better. The bullet bored through the left sleeve of Mixtli's robe and scraped the tender

flesh of her shoulder. She spun and fell, but she didn't stay down. She leaped to her feet with the agility of a cat.

Koerner took time to aim. It was incredible that this tiny adversary had proved so hard to kill. He must not miss again. But he was not trying to kill an ordinary woman. He was fighting a lioness, and she in turn, was fighting with the demoniacal fury that makes weak people strong.

Mixtli's arm moved faster than the eye could follow. Her right hand holding the knife went back, then forward. The blade flashed through the air.

Koerner saw it coming as he squeezed the trigger. It struck him on the wrist a split second before his shot was fired. It was just enough to spoil his aim. The bullet whizzed past Mixtli's head.

Koerner at first felt no pain. He was aware only of the fact that he had dropped his gun. His fingers had suddenly gone numb. He glanced at the red that spurted. Then Mixtli was upon him, scratching and clawing and screaming.

In the mad confusion neither heard the heavy pounding on the locked door.

CHAPTER 26

The Rescue

Tom Quest and his companions had heard Mixtli's screams of rage and the first of Koerner's gunshots while in the prison room. Itzacoatl knew that the sound came from the inner chamber of the temple. He heard the priestess shout the name of Koerner, followed by a string of epithets. He told the others that the priestess was in danger, then he led the way by a short cut toward the central room. He ran through a corridor with Actl at his heels. Tom Quest followed, and as he ran, he handed ammunition he had taken from the jeep to Whiz and Gulliver.

The running men heard more shots.

Itzacoatl came to a door and found it locked. Screams, shouts and wild cries came from inside.

"Maybe I could smash that door or shoot the lock," suggested Gulliver.

"Can't do it," replied Whiz Walton quickly. "The doors in this place are too heavy. We've got to find another door."

"This way," said Itzacoatl, starting to the right.

A narrow passage led into the vast anteroom.

There had been five shots, then no more. But both Mixtli and Koerner were alive and fighting. The oaths and screams were proof of that.

The wide main door was locked.

"Haven't you got a key?" asked Tom.

Itzacoatl shook his head.

"Lemme try that door," boomed Gulliver. He charged, hitting the heavy door with his shoulder. It didn't budge.

"You can't smash that door!" cried Whiz. "It's like a stone wall!"

Gulliver said, "I found that out." He hammered on the door with both of his mighty fists. "Open up!" he shouted. He pounded on the door again, but nothing happened.

Then he turned to face the others. "What'll we do?" he demanded. "That little she-male ain't no match for Koerner. How can we git into that there room?"

Itzacoatl and Actl shook their heads helplessly.

"We got to git in before it's too late. We—" Gulliver stopped abruptly. He was facing away from the inner chamber, facing the central entrance to the temple. He

could look out on the steps that led down to the patio, and there he saw his jeep.

"Great day!" he boomed. Then he was gone.

He ran out of the building and down the stairs, shouting warnings to the Indians to clear the path. He fairly leaped aboard his jeep. The engine roared and the car shot forward. Gulliver swung it in a tight turn that brought screeches from the tires. Then he shifted into the four-wheel drive and drove straight up the flight of stairs.

"Clear the way!" he bellowed as the jeep nosed through the central opening and into the big anteroom. "Git out o' my way! I'm goin' through that door!"

Tom grabbed Actl and pulled him out of the path of the oncoming jeep. Whiz Walton leaped back from the door, taking Itzacoatl with him. And none too soon.

The jeep came fast. Gulliver was braced and shouting, "I'll bust through. Yo' just leave things to me!"

The heavy bumper of the jeep slammed against the redwood door with an impact that fairly shook the building. There was a splintering sound, and a metallic rasp as the hinges of the door gave way. The door went down, and the jeep kept going.

Gulliver saw Koerner holding Mixtli to the floor. The priestess was writhing and squirming, but she was helpless in the tall man's grip. His long fingers were clasped about her throat.

Gulliver saw enough. He slammed on the brakes and

bounded out of the driver's seat. He grabbed Koerner by the back of his skinny neck and pulled him away from the writhing priestess.

"I been waitin' for this chance!" he bellowed.

"Wait!" cried Koerner. "Let me—" he got no farther. Gulliver's open hand came around in a slap that must have scrambled the senses of the pale-faced man. His head bobbed to one side, but not far. Gulliver's other hand was there to meet it.

Koerner reeled and staggered from the double slap. Then Gulliver pushed him into the hands of Itzacoatl and Actl, saying, "Yo' take care o' him. I got to see about the ole lady."

Tom Quest and Whiz were already at Mixtli's side.

"How is she, Tom?" asked Gulliver.

"A bullet brushed her shoulder, but I think it's just a flesh wound."

Gulliver confirmed this diagnosis. While he put a temporary bandage on the wound he spoke admiringly of Mixtli's courage.

Mixtli was exhausted and badly shaken, but by the time her wound was dressed, she had recovered some of her strength and was able to sit up. It was she who saw the knife in Koerner's heart.

No one knew who had put it there. The knife had been on the floor not far from where Koerner had dropped unconscious after Gulliver's rough treatment.

Tom and Whiz had been assisting Gulliver in caring

for the wounded priestess. Itzacoatl, when asked about the death of Koerner, shrugged his shoulders and said he knew nothing. Actl did the same. Both suggested that it must have been the work of the great god Texcatlipoca.

Mixtli eyed the two suspiciously.

"Texcatlipoca is great god. He does great things," said Itzacoatl. "He save life of Actl so Actl help save life of priestess. Instead of taking life of Actl, he take life of evil man."

Mixtli nodded understandingly and the faintest of twinkles appeared in her eyes. "Texcatlipoca," she said, "had help."

Actl started talking. Unlike the others, he spoke in Aztec, pleading with the priestess to spare his life and give him another chance.

Mixtli brushed him aside, saying, "Itzacoatl has given explanation. Evil man is dead. You live. It shall remain so."

Actl beamed and Itzacoatl looked happy.

Gulliver grinned at the priest and slapped him on the back. "I guess yo' squared things for yo' friend," he said.

Itzacoatl patted the flat hood of the jeep and said, "Strong medicine."

"Yo' can say that again," replied Gulliver. "An' now, we got to have a meetin' with the ole lady here. We got to dicker an' negotiate for them there boxes that Koerner tried to steal."

CHAPTER 27

Conclusion

HAMILTON QUEST played host in Oaxaca. Señor Gonzales and a number of other influential men, some of them high officials in the Mexican Government, were guests in the largest of the hotel rooms. Tom and Whiz were there, and so was Gulliver.

Photographs made by Tom had been passed around and then collected. Tom's father held them in a neat bundle.

"My son and his companions," he said, "spent several days on the Lost Mesa. They alone know where it is. While there, they learned about a master criminal who sought to gain control of all Mexico."

"But how," asked Señor Gonzales, "could any man do this?"

"Blackmail," replied the scientist, picking up another

sheaf of photographs. He extended one to Gonzales and said, "This is a picture of something that will interest you."

Gonzales read the document and paled. "This," he said thinly, "is something that happened ten years ago."

"At that time, you were an unimportant man in an unimportant position."

"Yes, yes."

"What is it?" inquired one of the officials.

"Here is one that will interest you, Señor Lorenzo."

Lorenzo read a different document, then gasped in alarm. "How did you get this?"

"Every man of great importance," explained Quest with a gentle smile, "starts out in a small position. In the States, for example, our Supreme Court justices of ten or fifteen years hence, are at present in small law offices, or presiding as judges in some small communities.

"Freshmen in our military academy are the men who will be generals in our army. In the life of every man there are small things that he would not wish to have become known—incidents and facts that might be enlarged upon or distorted to that man's discredit. Especially if he attains a post of power and influence.

"Koerner began a long time ago to learn these things about men whom he thought might rise to power. He secured documentary proof of them and reduced that proof to microfilm. Through the years he accumulated photographs of documents that might prove embarrassing to

hundreds of men. He reasoned that the law of averages would give him potential blackmail material to use against a score or more of men who governed Mexico."

Hamilton Quest tapped a bundle of photographs, each one an enlargement from the microfilm. "Here," he continued, "is the material that Koerner accumulated. In this box are the films from which these prints were made.

"With your permission, gentlemen, I shall destroy all of this material."

The visitors nodded quickly, and several spoke urging that such action be taken without delay.

"There is just one thing—"

"What is that?" asked Gonzales.

"My son will tell you."

Tom stood up. "We showed you photographs of a fine old lady whose name is Mixtli. She governs the people on the Mesa. She knew that we had found her lost civilization, and that we would report our discovery. She knew what that would mean.

"It would mean the end of a happy colony. Other people would go there. People who wanted to develop the place or to collect souvenirs. Newspapermen to take pictures and write stories.

"Those people," Tom went on, "are happy. They know little of our way of life. They are living in peace according to the traditions of their ancestors.

"Mixtli could have kept those microfilms. She could have held us there—all three of us. She could have killed

us, for that matter. But she let us go. And she gave me the films to bring back, because I promised her that I would do my best to keep her secret. I promised her that none of us would show the way to the Lost Mesa."

Whiz Walton spoke. "Gentlemen," he said in his suavest manner, "I have in my possession the story of the century. Magazines and newspapers would grab it at any price. Hollywood would buy it.

"We have all those photographs of the Lost Mesa and the people who live there, as well as the other—shall we say, embarrassing—photographs. But I, too, am willing to forget the whole thing if you will forget that the Lost Mesa exists."

The men in the room looked dubiously at one another.

Then Gulliver spoke. "Lemme tell yo' gents," he said. "Them people on the Mesa are all right. An' it'd be a downright shame to pester them."

Gonzales looked at Hamilton Quest. "Let me understand," he said. "We agree to forget that we have heard about the Lost Mesa, and you, in return, destroy—all that you hold in your lap. Is that correct?"

"That is correct." Quest pointed to a log fire in the fireplace. "The word of you gentlemen is all that is required, and I shall toss these photographs and the films into those flames."

Gonzales looked at his colleagues and saw nods of agreement. He gestured toward the fire.

Whiz Walton exhaled a long sigh that came from

down deep. He rose and crossed the room with his copious notes and photographs and tossed them into the fire on top of the documents and microfilms.

"There," he said, "goes the biggest story I'll ever get." He paused and then went on, "But it means the peace and security of people who befriended us.

"In a few months, the jungle will have grown over the trail we followed. Then once more they will be secure on their Lost Mesa for—who knows?—perhaps another century."

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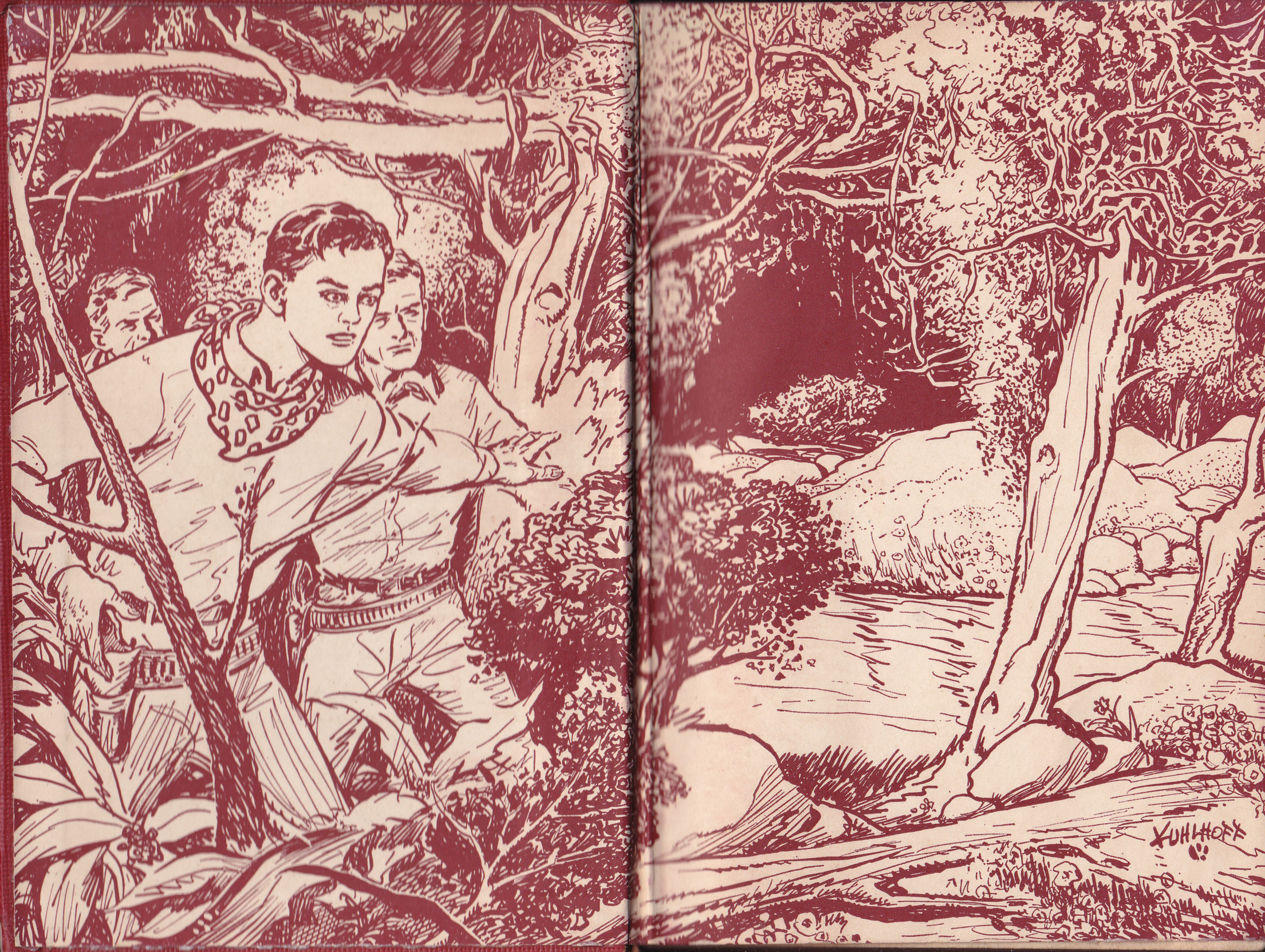
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